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Uncommon Common Readers

S. Oso
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A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

New books by Contributing Editors of THE HUDSON REVIEW have recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the books will not be reviewed in these pages, but are listed below for the interest of our readers:

BERT CARDULLO (trans. and with an introduction by): *German-Language Comedy: A Critical Anthology*. Susquehannah University Press. $47.50.

JOHN LOUGHERY: *Alias S.S. Van Dine: The Man Who Created Philo Vance*. Charles Scribner's Sons. $24.00.

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Comment:

After the Defense

January 1992

AFTER THE DEFENSE, I stood outside Philosophy Hall at Columbia University in New York, drinking the Mumm's Cordon Rouge that one of my friends had brought. A few feet to my right were the windows to the examination room where I had just been grilled over my dissertation. I still felt medium-rare and tenderized.

In front of me, Rodin's thinker seemed dazed by the unseasonable warmth, his face greenish in the mid-winter sun. I, too, felt dazed—light-headed from the champagne on an empty stomach, light-headed from the realization that eight years of my life at Columbia were finally over. I had my Ph.D., now what?

Other friends and acquaintances passed our party on the steps, offering congratulations, immediately followed by condolences on the abysmal academic job market. Almost no one was getting jobs in English—Columbia Ph.D. or no—in fact, almost no one had gotten more than one or two interviews at last year's Modern Language Association convention.

The woman who runs Columbia's Literature-Humanities program stopped to chat with us. She's in my field—nineteenth-century British literature—and a star student if ever there was one. She's charming, writes for the *New York Times Book Review* as well as for more scholarly publications, is a prime candidate for a good job. She, like me, had only two interviews this year. Last year she interviewed at Brandeis and Williams, and neither panned out. Both of those schools had interviewed over twenty candidates for each position; one of the schools simply kept the inside candidate—the person already temporarily in the position—and upgraded his status to tenure-track.

My chances were surely not better than hers; I didn't have much hope that either of my interviews would turn into a job. On the other hand, during my defense, I had begun to wonder if I even wanted a job as an English professor. Observing my interlocutors during the defense, I began to imagine myself metamorphosing into one of them—earnest, politically correct, hopelessly dedicated to arcana, to "theory."

In addition to my sponsor and second reader, my defense committee was comprised of three young feminist scholars: one from our department and my area, a second from the German Department and a third from History. My topic was sensation novels of the 1860s. The

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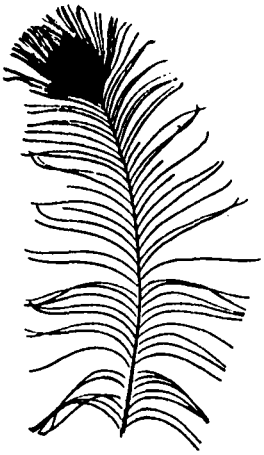

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historian, Betsy Blackmar, charmed me even as she made me squirm. She had that rare combination of high intellect and humane common sense. I even forgave her for invoking the new trendy verb, "valorize" (which has been swiped from economics and redefined to mean "to assign value to"), because most of what she said made sense. Blackmar, like my sponsors Jonathan Arac and Jean Howard, hoped to see me succeed as a scholar. She was thinking of my dissertation as a proto-book, and pushing me to reconceive it for a larger audience.

The other two committee members, however, had a different agenda, one which tired and annoyed me. The third from our department, a generally pleasant woman who will not get tenure at Columbia because she hasn't published enough, seemed intent on impressing my sponsors, at my expense. She found every weak spot in my argument and attacked it, but, unlike Blackmar, could not suggest any way in which I might improve the thesis. Some of her complaints simply boiled down to, "I don't like this, and I can't even say why."

The woman from the German Department, however, was a veritable Tartar. She embodied everything I dislike in young feminist scholars, the kind who feel they must prove themselves as aggressive as men. At one point, she took offense at a sentence in my dissertation that began, "Algernon Swinburne, that most famous flagellant of the nineteenth century, had swerved off the beaten path of normal sexuality . . ."

"Vot is 'normal'?" she wanted to know, chin jutting towards me. How dare I imply that *anyone's* sexual choice is somehow "abnormal"? I knew what dangerous forest we had just wandered into; somewhere near, that *bête noir* of the politically correct was lurking: homophobia. Of course I am not a homophobe, nor do I wish to curtail or condemn anyone's personal pleasure agenda. On the other hand, there *is* such a word as "normal," and it has a very specific denotation in addition to its many political connotations. The P.C. Thought Police who want to eradicate such words from the public lexicon are no better than Mississippi book burners, in my opinion: both of them are interested in suppression, excision; both of them are narrow-minded ideologues.

However, I dared not start a battle with a p.c. feminoid who might have the power to derail my Ph.D. I remembered a new jargon verb that might palliate her Teutonic temper, and an explanation to go with it. "I don't mean to privilege heterosexuality over alternative forms of sexuality," I began meekly, "but I think in the nineteenth century, approved— that is to say *normal*—sexuality, meant sexual acts that bore children within a married union."

The others agreed, and this got me out of the *tête-à-tête* with the German professor. However, before the defense was over, I made the additional mistake of saying one of the novels I studied was "brilliantly written." Among the p.c. literary critics, "evaluative" statements about books are out. Roll over in your grave, Matthew Arnold—

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"Dylan as an actor and as an explosive dynamic performing force was a dangerous rival for other actors, as I know, for I worked with him a few times or several, and once for instance a director said to him . . . 'Dylan will you take the words "Mam! Mam!" and scream them for me'; . . . and Dylan short, bandy, prime, obese, and famous among the bars screamed as I have never heard, but sometimes imagined a scream . . . and Dylan said that he'd bet I couldn't do that scream like that with a cigarette in my mouth and I shook off the centuries, stopped staring, smiled a little, noted that he had indeed monumentally screamed with a cigarette in his mouth and went stunned back to my crossword." —Richard Burton (1965)

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aesthetics are for philistines! Nowadays, "texts" do cultural or political work; their "style" is irrelevant.

But in my subversive heart, style *is* relevant. A good poem leaves me gasping, a good essay leaves me thinking, good prose in general lifts my spirit. But there damn sure isn't enough of it in literary criticism. Pick up a copy of any scholarly journal and see how far you get before the tortured syntax, the nouns-made-verbs, the specialized jargon relieve you of whatever initial interest you had in the topic. Even scholars can barely comprehend one another if they labor under different theoretical approaches, while normally literate readers haven't got a clue to these debates about the meaning and purpose of literature. More significantly, they no longer care about them.

Literary critics have lost touch with the general reader—or even the average college student—they have retreated to the Ivory Tower of Babble to spout jargon, to promulgate it in journals of limited readership, to waste their substance toiling in an arid, intellectual desert. If I listen hard, I can almost hear them singing to their gods: "Oh Praxis, Oh Politics, Oh Protean Text—valorize my life's work, privilege my theories that they may live a decade, and not deconstruct like Deconstruction!"

I remember a hot young Marxist-feminist scholar whom I met two years ago in Connecticut while my husband was a professor at Wesleyan University. I was telling her about some excellent short stories I was then reading (Lorrie Moore's *Like Life*, I think); I wanted to recommend them to her. "I never read fiction," she informed me. "I only read theory these days." She seemed proud of this, but it made me mentally queasy. Imagine choosing a diet of gravel and algae over one of truffles, filet mignon, potatoes au gratin? If I were forced to read nothing but theory, I'd probably . . . Well, what would I do? If I were an assistant professor on a tenure-track, that's probably all I'd have time to read. And what I would do is mix that gravel and algae into my academic articles and hope that other scholars would choke it down, just as I'd be choking down *their* offerings of dried bark and worms.

By the time my defense was over, and Jean asked me to step out of the room, I was exhausted. I hadn't eaten yet that day; I no longer had the energy to defend myself or my work from my examiners. I felt I had done a pretty bad job of upholding my thesis and, with horror, I contemplated the possibility of "major" revisions.

Outside the examination room, in the lobby of Philosophy, three of my friends were waiting for me. Melissa had the bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice, Robert had chocolates from Mondel's on Broadway, Laura had the new Margaret Atwood book I'd been wanting to read. They were dear friends, one and all, and had been with me at Columbia through most of the eighties. I could confess to them my

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fears. "I think I failed," I said. "I don't think I was politically-correct enough."

"You didn't fail," Laura said. "They wouldn't let you get to the defense if they thought you were going to fail."

"You're already publishing two chapters of your dissertation," Melissa said, "how can you fail?"

"They like to make you shake in your booties," Robert chimed in. "Their last chance to give you the old sado-masochistic, teacher-to-student, squeeze. Have a chocolate."

"I can't. I think I'm going to throw up."

"Then let me tell you some politically-incorrect jokes about dumb blondes," Melissa said. "How do you make a blonde's eyes light up?"

"I don't know."

"Shine a flashlight in her ear. Why do blondes wear underwear?"

"I don't know."

"To keep their ankles warm. Susan, where is your sense of humor? Quit worrying—of course you passed. Do you think Arac and Howard will want some of this champagne?"

As it happened, they did want some of that champagne. I passed my defense with the best marks—Column 1, Minor revisions. Jonathan Arac, a cutting-edge theorist who has never lost sight of the real world, toasted me with a plastic cup of the Mumm's. He told me he knew some people with writing jobs in D.C. where I now live, and that he would put me in touch with them.

Jean came out and had a little champagne, too. She worried that I had felt the defense went badly (I had; it did, from my point of view); she told me she would call someone she knew at one of the schools where I had interviewed and tell me the scoop. She hugged me and left—another professor, and one of the few, whom I really respected.

Our party wandered to the West End Café—where Trotsky used to drink, they say, before that ill-fated trip to Mexico—and where the drinks can still give you that ice-pick-in-the-head feeling, if you imbibe enough of them. But the West End has changed in the years since I began graduate school at Columbia: it used to be a grubby cafeteria that served macaroni and meatballs by day and hot jazz by night. Now it's gentrified but less vital: tastefully panelled in mahogany, the restaurant serves Northern Italian pasta dishes—eggplant and red peppers, artichoke and hearts of palm—and good wine. I don't know about the jazz.

After the defense, I sat at one of their comfortable tables with my friends. We ate carefully-prepared pasta and talked about the bad job market, and our impotent Ph.D.'s, and the Lost Generation of scholars among whom we would surely number. And I thought about the feminist professors on my committee and how earnest they had been about their beliefs—about theory and criticism. I thought about how they were dedicating their lives, spending their most creative energies, on work that would help very few people, work that would

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be obsolete in a handful of years. Would it really be such a loss, I mused, if the recession prevented me from joining their ranks? Could it be that some other life's work awaited me?

Through the clean plate glass of the West End, patrons now enjoy a good view of the proliferation of homeless people on Upper Broadway as they wander past. We four Ph.D.'s from Columbia paused in our conversation just as a human bundle of rags trundled by our window. She raised her coffee cup to me and blurted out a paragraph of schizophrenic jargon.

Incomprehensible to me, and to most people, that speech might nevertheless be brilliant in her world.

SUSAN BALÉE

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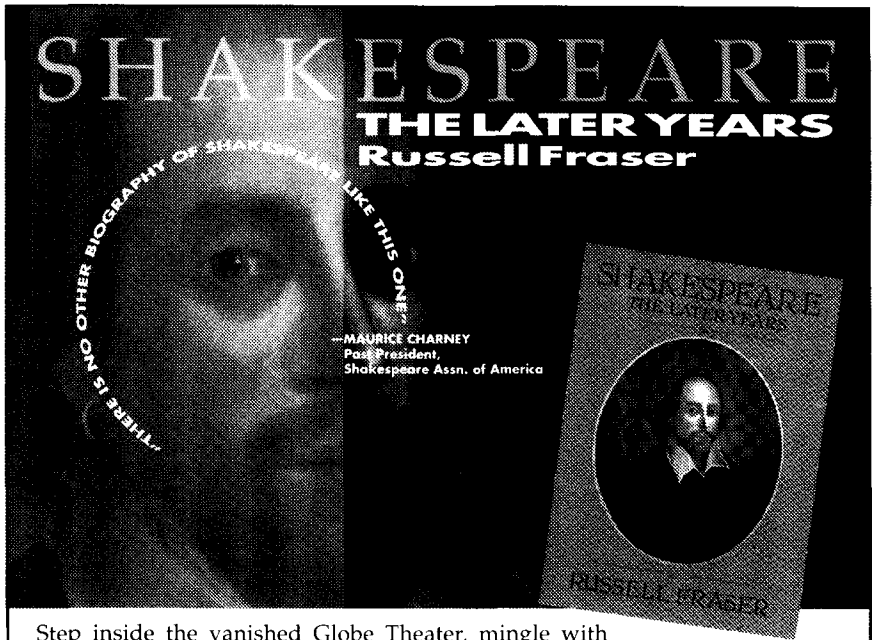

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FREDERICK BROWN

Zola and the Making of *Nana*

Born in Paris on April 2, 1840, Emile Zola was raised in Aix-en-Provence, where his father, an Italian engineer, had been hired by the municipality to build waterworks. François Zola died just as construction began and prospects of wealth turned into a nightmare of litigation from which his widow emerged penniless. This loss marked Emile for life. Another loss occurred when Madame Zola took her seventeen-year-old son north to Paris. Torn from his bosom friend, Paul Cézanne, he drifted unhappily through late adolescence, failing the baccalaureate examination, vainly seeking employment, and discovering the grim side of bohemia.

In 1862, fortune smiled on him. He was given a clerkship by Hachette and Company but soon became the firm's publicity director and in that position established a network of contacts throughout the newspaper world. Four years at Hachette persuaded him that he could earn his livelihood in journalism. And so he made the leap, quitting Hachette at about the same time he was moving in with Alexandrine Gabrielle Meley, whom he later married.

It was not long before he cut a figure with his denunciations of *pompier* art, his spirited defense of Edouard Manet, his attacks on the Church, and political diatribes that invited censure from Napoleon III's government. He also began a fictional saga entitled *Les Rougon-Macquart.* The Franco-Prussian War halted everything, but afterward Zola took up where he had left off, producing abundant copy for various newspapers and delivering a novel a year to his publisher, Georges Charpentier. Execrated by the critical establishment, he found solace in the company of Edmond de Goncourt, Ivan Turgenev, Alphonse Daudet, and, above all, Gustave Flaubert, who, though allergic to tags such as realism and naturalism, admired him greatly. When Flaubert came down from Croisset

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for his Paris season, these five—the so-called "Cinq"—would meet at his flat every Sunday afternoon.

With *L'Assommoir*, volume seven of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Zola achieved immense popularity. Published in 1877, the novel made him rich. It also attracted young writers—among them J.K. Huysmans, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique, and Guy de Maupassant—who were, in due course, to constitute his entourage.

The rue de Boulogne, where Zola and Alexandrine lived until 1889, bespoke their new-found prosperity. Angling up Montmartre from the rue Blanche, this street was an extension of the quiet, green neighborhood that had become known as "New Athens" after 1820, when famous artists and actors flocked to it. Talma, Mlle. Mars, Horace Vernet, Isabey, Granet had all resided there. So, too, had Ary Scheffer, whose villa on the rue Chaptal now accommodated Ernest Renan. Hector Berlioz had spent his last years nearby, on the rue de Calais. And two blocks north, at 48 rue de Douai, in a townhouse owned by Louis and Pauline Viardot, Turgenev occupied a cluttered flat from which he regularly limped downstairs with bags packed for Russia, or, on Thursday evenings, to enjoy musicales that attracted Gounod and Saint-Saëns, Jules Simon and George Sand.

Alexandrine may have nursed grievances against Emile, but an unwillingness to help her feather their nest was assuredly not one of them. Feathering the nest brought them closer together, and Zola's correspondence reveals as clearly as any Rougon-Macquart novel his penchant for interior decoration. "Along with embroidery, see if you can find two central images for the valences: gothic motifs against a gold background, which would complement the saints and have an elongated form—say, twenty-five centimeters by thirty-five," he instructed her from l'Estaque in September 1877, referring to a sixteenth-century-style canopied bed. "I know that they will be difficult to unearth. One might also put roundels of saints on all four sides of the baldaquin, and since we already possess two, we shall need only two more . . . I say this so that you may avoid a second shopping expedition. Don't run yourself ragged, however. If you can't find anything, why we'll just search hard upon

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our return!" Search they did. The success of *Les Rougon-Macquart* profited curio shops up and down the rue de Rennes, and antique dealers, especially those catering to the bourgeois taste for medieval bric-a-brac, found an avid client in Zola, who opened accounts everywhere. After the baldaquin bed came altar frontals, ponderous oak credenzas, stained-glass windows, tapestries that featured hagiographical scenes. "From old furniture he proceeded to knick-knacks, and therein lies a curious tale," wrote a close friend, Paul Alexis.

> Balzac says somewhere that parvenus always recreate the salon they coveted when young and poor. Well, his rule applies here, for the romantic of yesteryear survives in the decor of our present-day naturalist. Although he argues that a luxurious modern household would cost more than he can afford, thrift serves as a pretext . . . In his flat on the rue de Bourgogne . . . Zola had been able to fulfil old dreams. Wherever one turns, one's eye is greeted by stained-glass windows, by a Henri II bed, by Italian and Dutch furniture, by Aubusson antiques, dented pewter, 1830-style casseroles! When poor Flaubert paid a visit, these strange and sumptuous heirlooms sent his old Romantic heart into raptures. One evening, in the bedroom, I heard him say admiringly: "I've always dreamt of sleeping under such a canopy . . . This is the bedchamber of Saint-Julien l'Hospitalier!"

Bidding for ecclesiastical relics while anathematizing the Church, Zola valued his paraphernalia as other nineteenth-century bourgeois took pride in overstuffed museums and in the gallimaufry of Universal Expositions. For the self-made provincial whose ticket to Paris had been bought twenty years earlier with pawned furniture, collecting antiques was exorcising the specter of indigence. Paul Alexis, who knew this very well, might have reflected upon it in April 1878, during Zola's housewarming, when mentors, disciples, and publisher dined exquisitely on barded hazel hen. Only seven years had passed since his host had written from Bordeaux during the war, urging him to investigate refugees lodged in his vacant flat at 14 rue de la Condamine and to save, if possible, his crockery and furniture.

What Zola desired even more than a proper bourgeois flat, however, was a rural hideaway within easy reach of Paris, and the quest for one began soon after his six-month sojourn at

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l'Estaque in 1877. It led him northwest toward Verneuil where he found himself bewitched by the landscape of cows grazing on loamy meadows, of poplar windbreaks, of apple trees planted in quincunx, of enormous willows weeping into the Seine, of the Seine itself flowing around islets overgrown with vegetation. Except the occasional chug of passenger trains and the muffled drone of propeller-driven barges, absolute calm enveloped this riverine department. A shaded main road ran cross-country, undulating between velvety-green slopes like a lane in some English park. "Paris seemed a hundred leagues away," declared Alexis. "Peasants were the sole inhabitants and in the entire commune only one Parisian bourgeois had ever built a house." Soon there would be two.

A "For Sale" sign stopped Zola at Médan, whose few inhabitants nestled among walnut and aspen on the steep, thickly-wooded Left Bank south of Verneuil. It advertised a stone lodge hidden from the village by a nave of trees that swept downhill across a railroad bridge. Nondescript though it was, it looked out over a field of hay beyond which gleamed the Seine, and this prospect, including a slender island called l'Ile du Platais, sufficed to banish his misgivings. "I've bought a house, a rabbit hutch, between Poissy and Triel, in a charming nook beside the Seine, for nine thousand francs," he informed Flaubert. "I tell you the price so that you won't be too respectful. Literature has paid for this modest sanctuary, whose virtue is that it lies far from every railroad station and doesn't have a single bourgeois in the immediate neighborhood. I'm alone, quite alone. I haven't seen a human face in a month. The only problem is, settling in has been a terrible ordeal, whence my negligence."

After Zola took up residence at Médan in July 1878, his typically succinct letters evoke, *en passant*, the pleasures, the discomforts, the seasons and rituals of his new estate. "We are lodged here in a verdant paradise and I've gotten back to work but am still wobbly from the move," he wrote to a friend. "Everything will be all right in several days. The welcome mat is out and I regret very much that you can't bring your wife and baby." There were excursions around the islets all summer long thanks to Guy de Maupassant who, having bought Zola a wherry at Bézons, delivered the boat (which was promptly

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baptized "Nana") on Bastille Day. And when fall approached, it found the country squire well-prepared with shotgun at the ready. "Change of program," he alerted Hennique on September 1st, a week before the latter was scheduled to descend upon him for Sunday lunch, together with Céard, Huysmans, and Maupassant. "Hunting season opens on the 8th, and since I hope to scatter some local wrens, you'd find me tuckered out. Furthermore, my wife agreed to do a heavy chore that day. So please tell our friends that I shall expect them Sunday the 15th instead, if they can make it." Guests, of whom there were not yet many, would normally catch a Sunday morning train at the Saint-Lazare terminus, descend at Triel, and double back for two or three kilometers, following a hedgerow that separated the railroad track from the river path. But by late autumn, this delightful itinerary had become, more often than not, impractical. "Repeat to our friends that I await them next Sunday," Zola urged Céard on November 17th. "But I don't want you to get stuck in mud coming via Triel. If the sky is the least bit threatening, get off at Poissy, and contact M. Salles, who rents vehicles opposite the station. He'll bring you here in two coaches or in a small omnibus. Seriously, it's not worth running risks on roads as bad as these." A month later the mud lay frozen beneath snow drifts, which provided natural insulation for the writer happily toiling over *Nana*. "I doubt I shall be back in Paris much before January 5th," he informed Céard on December 14th. "The stage adaptation of *L'Assommoir* will probably not open until the 10th or 15th, and I shall avail myself of this delay to avoid New Year's Eve, remaining here buried in snow. You can't imagine how beautiful and silent the countryside is since frigid weather has gripped it."

Art and nature were not the only passions to detain him in Médan from July until January, however. No sooner had he signed a deed than he laid plans for the enlargement of the "rabbit hutch." Before long, building became inseparable from writing. The two activities kept pace with each other and as Zola added installments to his saga, masons added rooms to his house. "Nothing new, I don't see anybody," he told Flaubert in a letter dated September 26th, 1878. "The Charpentiers are the exception. They recently visited us and seemed quite cheerful. I've been working hard. For distraction I shall have some

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annexes built. I want a vast study with beds everywhere and a terrace perched over the landscape. There are times when I wish never to return to Paris, so peaceful is it in my retreat . . . *Nana* satisfies me." Cold weather arrested neither the growth of *Nana* nor the metamorphosis of a drab little cottage into a large ill-proportioned villa. "As you've gone through something of the sort, you will sympathize when I tell you that after acquiring a hut, I decided to add a wing bigger than the original structure," he wrote in December to Turgenev, who had built his dacha on the grounds of Pauline Viardot's country house at Bougival. "That's what's detained me and now I'm holed up avoiding New Year's Eve, which I loathe." Of Médan it will suffice to say that among the first objects purchased for the house was a Renaissance fireplace on whose huge, stone hood he had *Nulla die sine linea* ("No day without a line") emblazoned in gold letters and that this motto, which came from Balzac, suited the landlord as well as the novelist. Like Napoleon III, he could not stop building.

The history of *Nana* goes back to 1869 when, in his original plan for the fictional saga that became known as *Les Rougon-Macquart*, Zola foresaw

> a novel whose setting is the boudoir world and whose heroine is Louise Duval, the daughter of my working-class family. Just as the offspring of the Goiraud (Rougon), people mired in hedonistic pleasure, is a parasite, so the offspring of the Bergasse (Macquart), people gone rotten from the vices of poverty, is a creature noxious to society. Besides hereditary effects, there is in both cases the fatal influence exercised by the contemporary milieu. Louise is a harlot extraordinaire. Draw the world in which these high-flyers live. Poignant drama about the appetite for luxury and facile pleasures ruining a woman's existence.

Courtesans who had regaled café society during the Second Empire lost nothing of their glitter after Sedan and Zola devoted several newspaper articles to them, linking the "demi-monde" or "monde galant" with the official world and Bonapartist government with a penchant for erotic self-degradation. "Under the Empire, playboys obtained prefectures in the boudoirs of certain ladies, and a dance hall,

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the Bal Mabille, supplied ministerial bureaux with copy clerks," he wrote in *La Cloche* on July 14, 1872.

> The shadiest characters got the most coveted appointments, but unless one had good looks, nice clothes, white flesh, pink lips, and a diploma from the school of vice, one didn't rate even a humble job. When a nation stands ankle-deep in slime, it decays. Disease eats away, rises inexorably, reaches the heart. Our Republic must purge itself before gangrene appears. Those old men of thirty who have retired from the fleshpots are useless. Whenever I hear it said of one that "he sowed his wild oats and knows something about life, that sly dog!", I see a burnt-out wretch who mocks us as he upholds the solemn and sacred things he profaned in youth . . . We must be sure not to let the good old days return and to sequester at Charenton the rakes of yesteryear. Senators who crawl on all fours playing doggy to some harlot (like old Antonio in Otway's *Venice Preserved*), and septuagenarian magistrates who let their mistresses whip them don't have brains enough for the Republic.

The image of an aristocrat crawling before a harlot was squirreled away for future use. So, indeed, was the picture of titled gentlemen accompanied by titled ladies watching an English stallion defeat a French thoroughbred at Longchamps race track and later slumming it at the Bal Mabille on Avenue des Veuves. "The ladies' grandstand is full," reported Zola, who would in due course amalgamate the worship of equines and the idolization of trollops.

> Aristocratic names, all that's beautiful and elegant in Paris are there. Squeamish women who swoon at the mere idea of seeing a chicken bleed, come with the unavowable hope that an accident will occur, that a horse will break loose and stove in his jockey's rib cage. The sun burns white hands, the rain soaks flounced skirts. It's exquisite. The ladies smile divinely, survey the landscape through lorgnettes as if it were the stage set for a comic opera. Some even look at the horses. Meanwhile, carriages crush one another. The crowd flows down every path in the Bois de Boulogne, one hundred thousand curiosity seekers standing on tip-toe to see something and finally glimpsing, in a cloud of dust, four or five red, yellow, or blue splotches.

After dark, pandemonium reigned at Mabille, he wrote, conjuring up the vision of a decadent empire, a late-Roman pornocracy. "Victors and vanquished celebrated this equine

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high holy day in the painted tinplate boudoirs of whoredom. At dinner, they wax patriotic—marquis, counts, plain millionaires unable to hold their liquor. They throw their horses at one another, shouting 'Long live France! Long live England!', and engage in fisticuffs. It's the beginning of our military resurgence."

By August 1877, when Zola promised Marguerite Charpentier that the licentious masterpiece he hadn't yet begun would, commercially speaking, atone for the sedate novel he hadn't yet finished, there were marvelous scenes ready to be plotted. Not until 1878, however, did he open a fresh notebook and, in his obsessive way, embark upon an investigation of Paris's demimonde. Friends who had some acquaintance with the latter found themselves quizzed at length. "During the few months that the gestation of *Nana* lasted, he no longer received us—us, his friends—without turning the conversation to women and making us summon forth memories," wrote Paul Alexis. "One of us gave him all the details he needed for his description of the famous lesbian restaurant on the rue des Martyrs where women customers greeted the proprietress by 'kissing her full on the mouth'. Another told him about the party of tipsy young gentlemen in formal attire, whom nobody knew, crashing a harlots' supper at 5 A.M. Yet another provided the anecdote about bottles of champagne being poured into the piano. Zola listened to everything, noted everything, digested everything. The image of a bee confecting its honey from the nectar of various flowers may be shopworn, but what we brought him, or what he himself gathered on all sides, were indeed flowers of vice. . . ." Where Huysmans never strayed beyond his familiar Latin Quarter brothels, Henry Céard preferred upper-class venery and for Zola's sake recorded the antics of an histrionic courtesan named Lucy Lévy. Even more helpful was Flaubert's industrialist friend Edmond Laporte, who knew every nook and cranny of the Boulevard. As the dossier indicates, he plied Zola with minutiae about Second Empire horizontals, describing their origins, their habits, their amusements, their typical day, their townhouses, their views of men, their slang, their clientele. "She wants to ride horseback like Cora Pearl" is how one page reads.

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> Gets up at 10, 11 o'clock. Takes a bath in her room. The hairdresser arrives, cleans and knots her hair. She breakfasts (noon) with mother and a poverty-stricken old female friend. Spirited game of bezique, until 2 o'clock. At her toilette from 2 to 3, slips on a dressing gown and receives from 4 to 6, or goes for a ride in the Bois de Boulogne. At 7 o'clock the hairdresser, afterward a grand sortie to the theater or restaurant. Returns with her lover, talks until 1 A.M. Goes to bed at around 2:30.
>
> Those who take riding lessons in the morning. Summers in the country, many parties.
>
> Some accumulate, others devour. Creditors queue up in the morning, fraught atmosphere. Interior decorators, horse merchants.

Elsewhere, Zola noted helter-skelter the salient features of certain women whom Laporte obviously took pleasure undressing for him:

> Marie Tournier a fleshy lymphatic, carefree, indolent, impassive when screwing. Stupid. Very much to the taste of Russians. Constance Violet living with her mother, who never leaves her. Makes her dresses. Luxurious coach. Perfect order, bookkeeping for her loves . . . The townhouses well maintained, lackeys, butlers in powdered wigs, grand staircases with enormous landings . . . Foulard nightshirts so that men don't rumple their clothing.

Masculine amour-propre fared poorly in the demimonde, according to this informant. "Concessions dictated by lust. One musn't get mad. Such women can caress you one moment, when they're afraid you'll dump them. The next moment, when they've got a replacement lined up, they'll turn scornful. Abasement of the naked man, throwing everything to the winds for cunt. Everybody led by the tail, and the women indifferent. A pack of dogs in pursuit of a bitch who's not in heat."

Other anecdotes eventually woven into *Nana* were supplied by Offenbach's librettist Ludovic Halévy. For Zola, whom he admired greatly, Halévy evoked the golden age of Offenbachian merriment as only an insider could, describing the international crowd that filled the Théâtre des Variétés for *La Belle Hélène* in 1864 and *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein* in 1867 but also the social comedies enacted backstage. "The Prince of Wales in the dressing room of Offenbach's perennial star, Hortense Schneider," wrote Zola. "*La Grande Duchesse* was

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being performed. The prince goes backstage accompanied by Galliffet and Duvilliers [Napoleon III's son's tutor], both sloshed. The prince high. A birthday party for Hettman in progress. Someone attired in white satin with a grotesque royal headdress enters and offers champagne to the Englishman, who accepts. In the dressing room are Couder and other costumed actors. Strangeness of the scene. Schneider pretentiously maintaining her Grand Duchess airs: 'Your Highness', etc. How the other actors behave, this parodic nobility confronted by the genuine article. Stage managers, comic actors, princes, tarts all jumbled together." Halévy also served as guide when Zola set out to inspect the plant in which Offenbach manufactured sexy entertainment for Second Empire audiences. On February 15, 1878, they saw a three-act farce called *Niniche* at the Variétés and afterward wandered through the stagehouse, with Zola noting everything noteworthy about the arrangement of loges, staircases, backcloths, prop stores, rams and galleries. Here, he already knew, was where his voluptuous heroine would first cast a spell upon Tout Paris. Here was where Nana the tart would become Nana the goddess.

Certainly the final chapters of *L'Assommoir* had pointed to an uncommon fate for Gervaise Macquart's daughter. Brought up in a working-class slum, on the rue de la Goutte d'Or where stray girls acquire precocious expertise in the bewitchment of grown men, Nana proved more skillful than most. To save her from depravity, her aunt, who ran a business that employed several dozen young women at making artificial flowers, taught her the trade, but handiwork did not instill virtue or throttle ambition. Exasperated by slum life, she kept both eyes open and fled when deliverance presented itself in the person of a fifty-year-old button manufacturer. "Tramping through the mud and splashed by passing vehicles, dazzled by the splendors of shop windows, she had longings that twisted her stomach like hunger pangs, desires to be well-dressed, to eat in restaurants, to go to the theater, to have her own room with lovely furniture," wrote Zola. "She would stand stock still, quite pale with such desires, and feel a warmth rising from the Paris streets and creeping up her thighs, a fierce appetite for the enjoyments she felt bustling round her on the crowded sidewalk. And without fail, just when she was feeling like that, her

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old man would whisper his propositions into her ear." No sooner had she given this protector satisfaction than she left him to embark upon a vagrant career, spending nights at dance halls like the Grand Salon de la Folie and the Elysée-Montmartre, where her reckless performance of the can-can won her local fame. At fifteen, blond, buxom Nana was half-hooker, half-waif. The rue de la Goutte d'Or still offered her something like the comforts of home. She occasionally dragged herself there to recuperate from a brutal escapade. But visits became rarer as her clientele became more genteel. "'I've had some news,'" Gervaise told Coupeau just before the latter entered Sainte-Anne hospital for one last visit. "'Your daughter has been seen. Yes, she's very chic and doesn't need you any more. And happy as she can be she is, too! Oh, dear God, what would I give to be in her shoes!'"

Had Gervaise lived another two years, she would have lived just long enough to see the hoyden whom she couldn't keep from undressing adored for her nakedness on the Boulevard stage. *Nana* begins with this epiphany. An Offenbachian celebration of adulterous mischief called *La Blonde Vénus* having opened at the Variétés, Parisians flock there to see music-hall artistes disport themselves as Olympian deities. It isn't theater that lures them but women and in particular the debutante cast in the title role. "Nana's name was echoing more loudly than ever in every corner of the foyer and delay had sharpened curiosity," writes Zola.

> Why didn't the show begin? The men pulled out their watches, late-comers jumped out of their carriages before they had stopped, and groups of people came in from the sidewalk, where passers-by, slowly crossing the now empty gas-lit area, craned their necks to see inside the theater. A street-urchin came up whistling, planted himself before a playbill at the door, and cried out: 'Hey, Nana!' in a tipsy voice before slouching away, dragging his old boots. This raised a laugh. Dapper gentlemen repeated: 'Nana! Hey, Nana!' People were crushed together, a quarrel broke out at the box-office, and there was a growing clamor caused by the hum of voices calling for Nana, demanding Nana in one of those fits of haw-haw humor and crude sensuality which take hold of crowds.[1]

[1] Quotations from the novel are slightly revised versions of the Penguin Books translation by George Holden (London, 1972).

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When it becomes obvious that Nana can't sing, move or act, that she has more brass than talent, an audience otherwise quick to sneer goes wild. Among jejune Parisians who value low entertainment above high art and delight in the spectacle of classical mythology profaned by home-grown barbarians, her ineptitude serves her well, focussing attention on her physique:

> For certain rather spicy lines, she tilted her nose with pleasure and her pink nostrils quivered, while a bright flush colored her cheeks. She still swayed backwards and forwards, for that was all she knew how to do. And the audience no longer considered this repulsive; on the contrary, men aimed their opera-glasses at her. At the end of the verse her voice failed her completely, and she realized that she would never finish the whole song. So, without getting flustered, she thrust out one hip which was roundly outlined under a flimsy tunic, bent backwards so that her breasts showed to good advantage, and stretched out her arms. Applause burst forth on all sides. In the twinkling of an eye she had turned round and gone upstage, revealing the nape of her neck to the audience, a neck on which her reddish hair looked like an animal's fleece. Then the applause became positively frantic.

A charismatic animal, a *monstre sacré* born to destroy men (including the bastard son she boards in the country) emerges from this opera buffa. After several hours on stage, the eighteen-year-old who at first squirmed under the gaze of high society has mastered all eyes. "Every pair of opera-glasses was fixed on Venus. Little by little Nana had taken possession of the audience, and now every man sat spellbound. A wave of lust was flowing from her as from a bitch in heat, and it had spread further and further until it filled the whole house. Now her slightest movements fanned the flame of desire, and with a twitch of her little finger she could stir men's flesh. Backs arched and quivered as if unseen violin bows had been drawn across their muscles; hair on the nape of many a neck bristled under the hot, stray breath from some woman's lips." Her sex, we are told, is "omnipotent."

The smart set loses no time courting Nana at her posh, half-furnished flat. On one another's heels trip a rich, bushy-tailed Chérubin, a lecherous Jewish banker, a theater critic for whom business serves pleasure, a numbskull egregiously fond of his aristocratic particle, a young count named Xavier de

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Vandeuvres whose gambling debts are legion. These form her retinue and when, soon after the first night, she decides to congratulate herself by staging a midnight banquet, it is they who gather round her, arm-in-arm with demimondaine showgirls. "Around the table the gentlemen in question looked irreproachable, with their white ties and evening coats and their pale features, the natural distinction of which was further refined by fatigue," writes Zola.

> The old gentleman was as deliberate in his gestures and wore as subtle a smile as if he were presiding over a diplomatic congress. Vandeuvres, with his exquisite politeness towards the ladies next to him, might have been at one of the Comtesse Muffat's receptions. That very morning Nana had said to her aunt that, as far as the men were concerned, they could not have done better: they were all either well-born or wealthy, in other words out of the top drawer. And, as for the ladies, they were behaving very well. Some of them, such as Blanche, Léa, and Louise, had come in low dresses, but only Gaga was perhaps showing a bit too much, particularly in view of the fact that at her age she would have done better not to have showed anything at all.

Nana's banquet on the Boulevard Haussmann seems a far cry from Gervaise's birthday feast on the rue de la Goutte d'Or, but as champagne flows, table scraps accumulate, and respectable personae wilt, the two occasions come increasingly to resemble each other. "The guests had stopped eating and were simply toying with their platefuls of *cèpes à l'italienne* and *croustades d'ananas pompadour*," writes Zola, who has Nana's vulgar sisterhood exchange intimate details about famous men visiting Paris for the 1867 Universal Exposition.

> The champagne, however, which they had been drinking ever since the soup course, was gradually beginning to fill the guests with a nervous intoxication. They ended up by behaving less decorously than before. The women began leaning on their elbows in the midst of all the plates and glasses, while the men, in order to breathe more easily, pushed their chairs back; dress-coats mingled with light-colored bodices, and bare shoulders, half turned towards the table, took on a silky gleam. It was too hot, and the glow of the candles above the table grew yellower and duller. Now and then, when a woman bent forward, the nape of her neck shone like gold under a rain of curls, and the glitter of a diamond clasp lit up a lofty chignon . . . The guests were telling jokes at the tops of their voices,

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> gesticulating wildly, asking questions which nobody answered, and calling to one another from one end of the room to the other.

Into every Zolian celebration a revenant must burst. Like Lantier surfacing at the dinner held to affirm Gervaise's proprietary stake in life, an important scene in *L'Assommoir*, memories of eviction spoil Nana's new-found prestige. "Ever since the beginning of the supper party she had had the impression of no longer being in her own home. All these people had overwhelmed and bewildered her, calling the waiters, talking at the tops of their voices, and making themselves comfortable, just as if they were in a restaurant. She herself had forgotten her duties as hostess, busying herself exclusively with the portly Steiner, who was throwing apoplectic fits beside her. . . ."

Among patricians who fall for the ex-guttersnipe, none falls harder than Count Muffat de Beuville, Empress Eugénie's chamberlain, and *Nana* is as much the story of his descent as of her rise. Muffat owes his office to the fact that Napoleon Bonaparte had conferred noble patents upon his father, General Muffat, who sired him late in life. Raised alone under the pious, autocratic regime of a mother infatuated with priests, he exudes lovelessness. "Muffat was an old man's son, . . . not very light-hearted but reputed to be absolutely honorable. He lived by an old-fashioned code of conduct, with so lofty an idea of his dignities, virtues, and duties at court that he carried his head like a holy sacrament. Here is the splendid upbringing Madame Muffat had given him: daily confession, no escapades, nothing youthful. He attended mass and experienced faith in seizures that came upon him like brain fever." Childhood with Countess Muffat de Beuville set him up for marriage with Sabine de Chouard. Early along, he and Sabine generated enough warmth to produce a child. But since that birth, sexual congress has been rare and after more than sixteen years together the unhappy couple present a picture of mutual deprivation. Their dwelling reflects this predicament. The Muffat mansion on the rue de Miromesnil is a place of muted light, drab color and pervasive chill in which Sabine's soft, red silk armchair looks sacrilegious. "It was a huge square building, and the Muffats had lived in it for a century or more. The street front, in its

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melancholy, seemed to be asleep, lofty and dark and convent-like, with its great shutters nearly always closed."

Muffat would have shrunk from an operetta called *La Blonde Vénus* (even during the Universal Exposition, which excused a multitude of sins) if diplomacy had not compelled him to see it. When the Prince of Wales crosses the Channel for some French entertainment, Muffat serves as his cicerone. Together they visit the Variétés and between acts go backstage where Nana, half-naked, receives them in her dressing-room. Queen Victoria's rakish son, who feels very much at home, converses with perfect aplomb. But exposure to the voluptuous tart unnerves Muffat. "He, who had never seen the Comtesse Muffat put on her garters, was witnessing the intimate details of a woman's toilet, in a chaotic disarray of jars and a cloud of sweet perfume," writes Zola. "His whole being rebelled: the way in which Nana had taken hold of him terrified him and brought to mind exemplary tales of diabolic possession which he had read as a child." Seen through a peephole in the backcloth, she fills Muffat's field of vision, looming over the audience like Salome triumphant or Liberty at the guillotine. "Beyond the dazzling arc formed by the footlights the dark auditorium looked as if it were full of a reddish smoke, and against this neutral background to which the rows of faces lent a vague pallor, Nana stood out white and gigantic, blotting out all the boxes from the balcony to the flies. He saw her from behind, standing with body erect and arms outstretched, while on the floor, level with her feet, the prompter's head—an old man's head, with a humble, honest face—looked as if it had been severed from his body. At certain points in her opening number an undulating movement seemed to begin at her neck, descend to her waist, and die out in the trailing hem of her tunic. When she had sung her last note in the midst of a storm of applause, she bowed to the audience, the gauze floating about her, and her hair reaching down below her waist. And seeing her like that, bent in two with her hips broadened out, backing toward his peephole, the Count straightened up, looking very pale." Effete societies, Zola implies, worship castrating women.

To possess this illiterate siren becomes Muffat's *idée fixe* and in due course Nana, who fancies titled Frenchmen, gratifies him. The sexual awakening that results is calamitous. Every-

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thing upon which Muffat built his life—honor, family, office, faith—loses meaning as he marks time between assignations or broods over suspected rivals. Spellbound, the patrician turns slave, laying before his indispensable mistress the shreds of his amour-propre. Female narcissism goes hand in hand with male self-hatred. "Nana was lost in ecstatic contemplation of herself," writes Zola. "She bent her neck and gazed attentively in the mirror at a little brown mole just above her right hip. She touched it with the tip of her finger and, by leaning backwards, made it stand out; situated where it was, it presumably struck her as both quaint and pretty. Then she studied other parts of her body, amused by this examination, and filled once more with the depraved curiosity she had felt as a child. The sight of herself always surprised her, and she looked as astonished and fascinated as a young girl who had just discovered her puberty . . . Muffat sat looking at her. She frightened him. The newspaper had dropped from his hands. In that moment of clarity and truth, he despised himself. Yes, that was it: she had corrupted his life, and he already felt tainted to the core of his being by undreamt-of impurities. Now everything was going to rot within him, and for a moment he realized how this evil would develop. . . ." Prescience does not avail him. Nor does prayer. Like "Venus fastened tooth and claw to her prey," the inextricable Nana plays sadistically, cancelling engagements, making him queue up for her favors, letting him know that Sabine has cuckolded him, and at last fleeing, as if to prove herself more independent than her keeper.

This will not be the last such escapade. After many more swings high and low, the destructive impulse suborns the will to live. Manipulated by a dead hand, Nana in all her glory turns against herself, auctioning every possession before disappearing once again. Rumors fly, but no one knows where she has gone until, some months later, she returns, penniless. Luck then abandons her completely. Summoned to the bed of her son Louis, who has caught smallpox, she catches it from him and decomposes overnight. Fellow actors and actresses, one of whom arranges for her to die in style at the Grand Hotel, keep vigil outside her room, from which emanates an unbearable stench. And on the Boulevard below, crowds chant "*A Berlin! A Berlin! A Berlin!*" It is July 1870, which means that war impends.

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Tramping east with the same ecstatic zeal that saw them pack the Variétés in chapter one, Frenchmen bring *Nana* full circle, from *eros* to *thanatos*. They will never have seen Venus' last face, these zealots. Nor will they have seen their own. "What lay on the pillow was a charnel-house, a heap of pus and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh. The pustules had invaded the whole face, so that one pock touched the next. Withered and sunken, they had taken on the greyish color of mud, and on that shapeless pulp, in which the features had ceased to be discernible, they already looked like mould from the grave." Rotting is condign punishment for the child and agent of social degeneration.

The child and agent of social degeneration is how Nana appears from beginning to end. The novel describes how, in an article published by *Le Figaro* during her heyday, Fauchery the theater critic, who knows whereof he speaks, describes her as a lethal insect. "Entitled 'the Golden Fly,'" writes Zola,

> it was the story of a girl descended from four or five generations of drunkards, her blood tainted by an accumulated inheritance of poverty and drink, which in her case had taken the form of a nervous derangement of the sexual instinct. She had grown up in the slums, in the gutters of Paris; and now, tall and beautiful, and as sturdy as a plant nurtured on a dungheap, she was avenging the paupers and outcasts of whom she was the product. With her, the rottenness that was allowed to ferment among the lower classes was rising to the surface and rotting the aristocracy. She had become a force of nature, a ferment of destruction, unwittingly corrupting and disorganizing Paris between her snow-white thighs, and curdling it just as women, every month, curdle milk. It was at the end of the article that the comparison with a fly occurred, a fly the color of sunlight which had flown up out of the dung, a fly which had sucked death from roadside carrion and now—buzzing, dancing, and glittering like a precious stone—was entering palaces through the windows and poisoning the men inside, simply by settling on them.

What she mobilizes is not the procreative libido but an instinctual force that overwhelms men who despise themselves and their authority, casting them adrift in the wreckage of traditional values. Under her regime, everything gets turned upside down. High culture becomes grist for low comedy. Noble patrimonies become capital for slumming and gambling.

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Princes of the blood honor stage royalty. Well-bred marquises follow where uncouth strumpets lead. Memory forgets itself as titled men who have lines to preserve sport with women who have pasts to bury. In short, gutter life enters officialdom through the front door, and we see it do so quite flagrantly at the marriage of Muffat's daughter, Estelle. Although Nana herself receives no invitation, she is there, triumphant, in the music to which gentlefolk dance. "People were already dancing," writes Zola. "The orchestra, which had been stationed in the garden, in front of one of the open windows, was playing a waltz, the supple rhythm of which was carried away on the night air, and could be heard only faintly in the house. And the garden seemed to spread out into the distance, bathed in transparent shadow and lit by Chinese lanterns, with a refreshment table installed in a crimson tent pitched on the edge of a lawn. The waltz, which happened to be the vulgar one from *The Blond Venus*, with its naughty, laughing lilt, came rippling into the old house to send a warm thrill along the walls. It was as if some wind of sensuality had come in from the street and were sweeping a whole vanished epoch out of the proud mansion, carrying away the Muffats' past, a century of honor and religious faith which had fallen asleep beneath the lofty ceilings."

For informants like Halévy, who felt Second Empire Paris come to life again in Zola's fresco of rampant promiscuity, no historian could have done better than the novelist. When restaurateurs earned millions, even greater wealth had indeed accrued to those courtesans dubbed *lionnes* or *demi-mondaines*. Exempt from the punishment visited on common whores and from the corset imposed on proper matrons, they held sway over the Boulevard. Zola got it right in portraying them as the delusion of an inflationary world. Linked with men whose titles gave them credit, they embodied a sexual magic inseparable from the appetite for patents of nobility, or from the dream these evoked of pleasure uncontaminated by mundane responsibilities. What led the parvenu financier to invest in some dubious venture that carried the Duc de Morny's endorsement led him to stake a fortune on Morny's latest concubine. Gilding the idol of brass, he rewarded her not for her solicitude, nor even for her expertise, but for her narcissism. Did Cora Pearl,

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a working-class Londoner born Emma Crouch, who had her breasts reproduced in plaster, complain, when her jilted lover shot himself dead in her living room, that "the pig has ruined my beautiful carpet"? Did La Paiva, an East European Jewess born Theresa Lachmann who married a Portuguese marquis, dismiss her husband after their wedding night with the explanation that she was content to be a whore and had ceased to find him amusing? Such stories, far from compromising the *lionne*, won her fresh tribute, for they argued, along with her predatory instinct, a hard-heartedness reminiscent of the mineral world in which idols were expected to feel most at home. "If *Les Frères Provençaux* served an omelette garnished with diamonds, Cora would eat omelettes there every night," said the Duc de Gramont-Caderousse of Cora Pearl.

Men, certain men, fancied the idea that nature had given this unmaternal species a born affinity to diamonds, silver, gold, pearls, crystal. And the *lionne* did not often disappoint them. In La Paiva's establishment at 25, avenue des Champs-Elysées, for example, they were shown a staircase made of pure onyx, a ceiling of naked nymphs, bathroom walls tiled with mirrors and agate, a tub of marble and silvered bronze into which water flowed from gem-encrusted faucets, a bed that cost one hundred thousand francs, and finally La Paiva, who wore cheap garments as if to proclaim that the jewelry in which she habitually draped herself was clothing enough. "Marvelous thing, wealth! It pardons everything," wrote the Goncourts after dinner with her. "Nobody who comes here notices that there isn't a house in all of Paris more uncomfortable than hers. At table, drinking a glass of watery wine is quite impossible as the bottles and carafes dreamed up by her are cathedrals of crystal it would take a water-carrier to lift." On some other occasion the Goncourts would have deemed it self-evident that the Hotel de Paiva enshrined not only the body of a courtesan but the materialism of a God-forsaken society, and would have been quick to declare that man a fool who entered a temple expecting the comforts of home. Indeed, several years before, during the Exposition of 1855, when people were queueing up to see the crown jewels, they observed in their journal that "if it were possible to give them Rembrandt's light or Hugo's poetry in material form, to make it visible and tactile, they would spurn

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it for a diamond like 'The Regent,' the diamond being the most concentrated essence of wealth."

Like previous Rougon-Macquart novels, however, *Nana* owes as much to Zola's great gift for weaving his obsessive themes through the fabric of social circumstance as to history per se. "A corner of Creation reflected by a temperament" is how he defined the naturalist enterprise, and nowhere does this temperament operate more idiosyncratically than in a chapter about Tout Paris gathering at Longchamp to watch thoroughbreds contest the annual Grand Prix. He pictures one hundred thousand spectators shouting themselves hoarse when a filly of no account named Nana challenges a famous English stallion named Spirit. Accompanied by this savage chorus, the race becomes a preview of war and a celebration of whoredom. "The main body of horses was now arriving like a flash of lightning," writes Zola.

> You could feel it coming, the breath of it like a distant rumbling which grew louder every second. The whole crowd had thrown themselves impetuously against the rails, and preceding the horses a deep roar came from countless breasts, drawing nearer and nearer like the sound of breakers on the shore. It was the brutal climax of a colossal game, with a hundred thousand spectators possessed by a single passion, burning with the same gambling fever, as they watched these animals on whose galloping hooves fortunes were riding. The crowd jostled and pushed, fists clenched and mouths gaped; every man for himself, and every man whipping on the horse of his choice with voice and gesture. And the cry of the multitude, the cry of a wild beast reincarnated in a frock-coat, grew more and more distinct: "Here they come! Here they come! Here they come!"

As Nana the filly passes her male competitors down the stretch, Nana the woman, who watches from a gorgeous, silver-trimmed landau, comes to identify with her, as in some totemic ritual:

> On the seat, without realizing what she was going, Nana had started swaying her thighs and hips as if she were running the race herself. She kept jerking her belly forward, imaging that this was a help to the filly. With each jerk she gave a sigh of fatigue, saying in a low, anguished voice: "Go . . . Go . . . Go."

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Nana's repeated exhortation—"Va donc . . . va donc . . . va donc . . ."—calls to mind the repeated plea for help, in *L'Assommoir*, of her destitute mother begging on the outer boulevards: "Monsieur, écoutez donc . . . Monsieur, écoutez donc." Can this echo have been anything but deliberate? Surely not. Where Gervaise finds herself penniless in front of the abattoir, like a nag brought to slaughter, Nana queens it over purebreds. Where Gervaise goes unheard, Nana, avenging her, commands acclaim. Where Gervaise sinks meekly, Nana unleashes upon France—upon upper-class France—the *bête humaine*. "There came a sound like the roar of a rising tide: 'Nana! Nana! Nana!'" Zola continues.

> The cry rolled along, swelling with the violence of a storm, and gradually filling the horizon, from the depths of the Bois to Mont Valérien, and from the meadows of Longchamp to the plain of Boulogne. All over the public enclosure, wild enthusiasm reigned, cries of "Long live Nana! Long live France! Down with England!" The women waved their parasols; men leapt and spun around, shouting and cheering while others, with shouts of nervous laughter, threw their hats in the air. And from the other side of the track, the weighing-in paddock responded, as emotion swept through the stands, although nothing was really visible but a trembling of the air, like the invisible flame of a brazier above the living mass of little disjointed figures with waving arms and black dots which were eyes and open mouths.

Images of people filling an immense enclosure with passionate commotion as they throng together spellbound recur throughout *Les Rougon-Macquart*. In *Nana*, Paris's hippodrome amplifies the roar of the multitude who have sought refuge from dull dailiness in the magic of gambling, in the savagery of war, in a world with totems but no tabus, in fantasies of carnal utopia. "Nana," writes Zola

> could still hear her name, which the whole plain was echoing back to her. It was her people who were applauding her, while she towered above them, erect in the sunlight, with her golden hair and her white and sky-blue dress . . . Nana's court was growing all the time, her triumph persuading the laggards to join her, so that the movement which had made her carriage the center of the public enclosure was now ending in an apotheosis, with Queen Venus enthroned amid the enthusiasm of her subjects . . . When the champagne had arrived, and she raised her brimming glass, there

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> was such a storm of applause, and the shouts of "Nana! Nana! Nana!" were so loudly chanted, that the crowd looked round in astonishment for the filly; and nobody could tell whether it was the horse or the woman that stirred every heart.

Half human and half myth, Nana with her blond mane figures from the outset as *femme fatale* and apocalyptic Beast. "A delicate line, curving only slightly at the shoulder and thigh, ran from one of her elbows to her foot" is what Muffat observes early along. "Muffat's eyes followed this charming profile, noticing how the lines of the fair flesh vanished in golden gleams, and how the rounded contours shone like silk in the candle-light. He thought of his former dread of Woman, of the Beast of the Scriptures, a lewd creature of the jungle. Nana's body was covered with fine hair, reddish down which turned her skin into velvet; while there was something of the Beast about her equine crupper and flanks, about the fleshy curves and hollows of her body, which veiled her sex in the suggestive mystery of their shadows."

Zola had written only a detailed sketch of the novel when he told Céard in August 1878 that it would "entertain and flabbergast." This conviction grew upon him during the following months, but nothing, not even *L'Assommoir*, quite prepared him for the huge success it was destined to enjoy.

Laffitte, editor-in-chief of *Le Voltaire*, which serialized *Nana*, announced it on May 17th, five months before delivery, hoping that by October multifarious rumors about its true nature would have incited Parisians to pounce upon the first installment. When October rolled around, on the 8th of the month, he declared that *Le Voltaire* would never bow under pressure: "We recognize that to publish so audacious a writer we, too, must demonstrate audacity, and that we may count upon intellectually valiant readers." Thus commenced a publicity campaign of unprecedented scope, with sandwich men and bill posters overspreading the metropolis. "Enormous curiosity surrounds *Nana*," Céard informed Zola on the eve of publication, October 15th. "The name is plastered over every wall in Paris. It's verging on obsession and nightmare. The *Voltaire* distributes posters by the thousand. You can't imagine what walls look like, how cluttered they are. Derveaux, Huysmans'

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French publisher, has prudently delayed advertising *Marthe* lest it drown in the flood of Nana, Nana, Nana." Paul Alexis was also astonished. "The *Voltaire*," he observed several years later in *Notes d'un ami*, "had unleashed a veritable orgy, placing advertisements everywhere—in papers, on walls, on the chests and backs of a legion of sandwich men, and even at the end of those miniature rubber chimneys where, in tobacco shops, customers light their pipes and cigarettes. *'Read Nana! Read Nana! Read Nana!!!'* Only half-written, the novel had already become provender for the crowd—devoured, discussed, applauded, above all, outrageously repudiated." Newspaper commentary amplified this brouhaha. On October 15th, the *Gaulois*, which was read mainly by upper-class Parisians, ran a long article in which Alexis, with Boswellian attention to minutiae, chronicled the master's typical day at Médan. And one week later, Albert Wolff, literary critic for *Le Figaro*, who exercised considerable influence, gave *Nana* his benediction by declaring Zola's frescoes of Paris to be the work of "a great artist."

Wolff's praise did not disarm hostile critics. *Le Voltaire* had no sooner published the first installment than they marshalled themselves against Zola, heaving brick-bats of every kind. In *La Gazette de France*, Pontmartin characterized him as a "regardeur" (a euphemism for "voyeur"): "Given M. Zola's genre, given the subject he chose, his literary program, the main sewer down which he leads us, the cloaca in which he has us wallow, the garbage dump to which he invites us, the smelling salts and cesspool boots he forces us to use,—given all this, there is no excuse for his being even less faithful to reality than the disciples of the Vicomte d'Arlincourt and M. de Marchangy." Other papers took up where *La Gazette* left off and on October 24th, in *L'Evénement*, Aurélien Scholl, who had been editor-in-chief of *Le Voltaire* until Laffitte replaced him, joined the crowd that damned *Nana* as "false." Zola's investigations backstage had been superficial, he observed, attacking the naturalist on his own ground. "Except several coarse words, which the public doesn't ordinarily encounter on a printed page, the latest novel by the author of *L'Assommoir* is, thus far, neither original nor true. . . ." Although Zola expected such criticism, it upset him nonetheless. "What a dandy row!" he wrote to Laffitte on October 28th. "I confess that it troubles me a bit, on account of

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the blood-lust critics display. If *Nana* were finished, I'd be happy to attend your soirée. I am isolating myself, cloistering myself lest I lose my balance in this storm." Feigned indifference was not his strong suit, and after a fortnight of abuse he fought back in *Le Voltaire*, explaining how

> the newspapers all say pretty much the same thing: that because I have never frequented the world of prostitution I know nothing about its mores, its tales, its language and can only produce a work subversive of my own creed. What's implied here goes beyond me: every novelist stands accused when it is considered axiomatic that one cannot treat a particular world without having lived in it for quite some time . . . But the thing that bothers me most is the aplomb of those gentlemen who demonstrate in four lines that my facts are wrong, basing their contention on sheer fantasy. They learn that I spend several months a year in the country and right away make me out to be a yokel for whom Paris is unknown territory. . . .

Undaunted, the new champions of truth in fiction continued to heckle him. "Nana is the whore at her rawest and most bestial, a fleshy streetwalker thrust by chance onto a stage and into a townhouse, then dragged down again by the law of gravitation," wrote Paul de Saint-Victor. "She is stupid and trivial, . . . yet Zola would have us accept this inferior wench as the only true, authentic representative of a world remarkable for its complexity and variety, where inimitable creatures abound!" Louis Ulbach, a sententious writer whom Zola had roughed up in "Contemporary Novelists," seized the opportunity to avenge himself. "The Marquis de Sade believed—so his contemporaries tell us—that what he had undertaken in his works was a moral endeavor," he fulminated in *Gil Blas* on February 24th, 1880. "This mania resulted in his being locked up at Charenton. Zola's mania may not have such acute symptoms, and nowadays one often allows modesty to avenge itself unaided. But *Nana*, like *Justine*, falls within the province of pathology . . . It betrays the incipient erethism of an ambitious, impotent brain driven mad by sensual visions . . . "

Throughout the uproar Zola scribbled furiously, keeping one or two installments ahead of his readers, like a composer delivering music to an orchestra playing his unfinished score even as reviewers boo from the gallery. Friends in Paris were

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regularly called upon to send him needed information. "In high society, when there's a marriage, does one give a ball, and if so, on which evening, the evening of the contract signing or of the church ceremony?" he quizzed Marguerite Charpentier (à propos of Estelle Muffat's marriage). "I would very much like to stage the ball in the Muffat salon, but if the ball is impossible, can I have them give a soirée?—Also, if it's the evening of the contract signing, what would be the bride's attire? And if it's the evening of the church ceremony, should I have the newlyweds depart on their honeymoon trip after leaving the ball? I'm being so mercilessly harrassed that I dare not get any details wrong . . . Furnish me with as much precise material as possible; I'll tell no one that you collaborated on *Nana*." To Henry Céard, Zola assigned chores that required field work—the description of a room in the Grand Hotel, for example, or of a corpse disfigured by smallpox—and this meticulous, nervy, learned ex-medical student never let him down. "I send you herewith the best I was able to glean about smallpox at Delahaye's bookstore," Céard wrote on December 16th, when *Nana* stood nearly complete. "Pages 32, 37, 48, 59, 65, 66, 74, 75, 81, 111, 150 will furnish you, I believe, enough technical documentation. Note in particular the appalling picture of smallpox drawn at the end of the volume—a bit specialized unfortunately. The Dupuytren Museum possesses no death masks of smallpox, so I went to Dr. Hardy's publisher, Hardy having compiled a marvelous atlas of skin diseases. Decorated gentlemen, all doctors, browsing at the back of the bookstore seemed astonished by my questions . . . Should you find the technical jargon daunting, here's what I propose. From my medical school days I know staff at Lariboisière Hospital and I can contact them. With some luck there will be a smallpox-ravaged cadaver laid out in the amphitheater; they'll notify me, and I'll get the required information *de visu*." Zola accepted his proposal by return post. "I received the book on smallpox yesterday," he wrote on December 18th. "Obviously, it answers my needs. I shall *invent* a mask, by splicing together documents. I'm very tempted by black smallpox, which is more unusual in its ghastliness. But I admit that if you could inspect a corpse without inconveniencing yourself—strange request, eh?—it would please me. . . ."

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Being told of *Nana*'s nativity before anyone else outside Médan was Céard's reward for loyal service. "Since *Nana* interests you, since you've given me such valuable information," Zola informed him on January 7th, 1880, "here's the great news: I finished it this morning. What a sigh of relief I heaved! Never has a work agitated me as this one did. Now the novel is worth what it's worth, that's no longer any concern of mine. Give up the search for a death mask. I've written a description and am so satisfied with it that I wouldn't change a jot or tittle, even if it were proven inaccurate. . . ."

The appearance of *Nana* in book form on February 14th, 1880 occasioned more salvos from the press. Cartoonists joined reviewers and bombarded Paris with "nanatomical" drawings so imaginative or malicious that Céard, whose curatorial instincts later benefited the Carnavalet Museum, was moved to collect as many as possible. Before long, rumors of imminent government action began circulating. In fact Zola had been put on notice the previous December, when Laffitte insisted upon cuts lest Gambetta, President of the Chamber, punish *Le Voltaire*. "I spent several hours in Paris," Zola advised Céard on New Year's day. "All sorts of bothersome things summoned me there, including Laffitte's latest panic attack: he chatted with Gambetta who finds *Nana* too racy. . . ." The feuilleton ran its course with impunity, but serials did not exonerate bound volumes, and so, after February 14th, it was Charpentier's turn to fret. "*Nana* may be seized," Maupassant wrote in a letter to Flaubert. "My authority is Sir Charpentier himself, who, when the Public Prosecutor's office ordered him to disclose the name of his bookbinder, went slightly berserk and dashed all over town, alerting Zola, warning booksellers, hiding available copies in friends' houses . . . The corridors of the Comédie-Française were abuzz with speculation the evening I saw *Daniel Rochat*. . . ."

Speculation worked very much to Zola's pecuniary advantage. No one seized *Nana* except readers with 3½ francs to spend, and the demand was phenomenal. Fifty-five thousand copies sold overnight (with novels a sale of four thousand was considered excellent). Charpentier thereupon had another eleven thousand printed. They, too, sold lickety-split and soon orders for earlier works began to multiply. The entire saga

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drove a thriving trade. Every month saw some new record set and this boom continued month after month, then year after year. By 1885, four hundred forty thousand copies of Rougon-Macquart novels were circulating through France.

When, on April 1st, 1880, the now famous author turned forty, his cup was running over. Not only had he achieved immense popular success but he had done so without sacrificing those qualities that commanded the respect of writers whose judgment he valued. It is safe to say that one accolade from Croisset could make him forget aspersions cast upon him in the press, and he received it soon after *Nana* appeared. "My dear Zola," Flaubert wrote on February 15th. "I spent all of yesterday until 11:30 in the evening reading *Nana*. I didn't sleep last night and I remain stupefied by it. If I were to note everything rare and strong, I'd fill the margins of every page! The personalities are wonderfully accurate, *true-to-life* words abound; at the end Nana's death is *michaelangelesque*! An enormous book, my good fellow! . . . Nana becomes mythic, without ceasing to be real. *Dixi*. . . ."

Zola never received another word of praise from his staunch friend. Three months later Flaubert died of a massive stroke.

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DANIEL HOFFMAN

Mean Street

In sneaks, in shorts, in tie-dyed tee shirts,
one burly, blond, the other swarthy,
leaner, younger, snatch at each other
circling, till one gets an armlock
on the other's head. A pretty hot day for
fooling around with Greco-Roman,
or is it Catch-as-Catch-Can?—only
they're not fooling. They edge each other
grimly within the ring of onlookers
each trying to throw the other off
balance, enormous effort—the lean one
shoves his leg between the other's
knees and down they fall, hard
on the cracked pavement, scattering tattered
piles of magazines, the plastic
sunglasses with sequins or without,
each merchandise displayed on two
squares of pavement precisely, as though
by treaty, jumbled as the blond guy
lands on his back in grime, trying
to arch his back, to turn, but the lean one
prevents and pinions him, then grasps
a fistful of his long hair and beats
the back of his head on the pavement, a *thud*
and a *thud*, a *thud*—If ya ever call
me that again—a *thud*—I'll KILL ya,
dja hear? his flushed tiger face
glares, fangs bared. On his back
the blond guy looks scared, feebly
surrenders. He's had it. The insulted feels
the insult, whatever, it was, was not
worth really killing the bastard

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—though it feels good, good, the power
to do it, calm with surely knowing
a couple or three more *thuds*—so easy!—
and the guy'd be dead. So, can it
satisfy, letting him off with
just the pain, the fear, and then
remembering the fear and pain?
Still holds his hair, could give a quick
yank, a real *thud* . . . But no,
he'll be content, this time, to gloat
on the other's fear, his pain, his shame.
They separate, get up, dust off,
the loser gazing far away,
the victor staring through him while
the passersby who'd stopped their passing
to form the ring that made this brawl
a gladiators' struggle, break
and melt away. A couple stay
to help re-establish peace,
gathering the sunshades flung
or kicked into the gutter, stacking
the magazines in rows again.
Grimly, the merchants mind their wares.
They've made no sales. The people fade.
A taut, baleful silence reigns.

Called Back

It's got to be a big one, so resonant
is its repeated cry—the sound of a cracked
bronze bell twice struck under water
—so it's not a bittern ('a slow, deep
ong-ká-choonk, ong-ká-choonk'), nor a Great
Blue Heron ('Deep harsh croaks: *frahnk, frahnk,*
frahnk') that keeps on throbbing in the twilight,

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in deepening dark, till, in thick woods, sounding
closer now, the insistent, endlessly
repeated call—through the fringe of tall spruce
at the field's edge I with fox-tread walk, thrust
onward toward the bird's reclusive summons,
seeming nearer, by black boughs concealed now,
then farther off, in deeper, darker woods,
so I press through the warm and moist black air
at once so menacing, yet half-familiar
as though, sometime, before remembering,
I'd been here and the two-toned urgent throbbing
in my ears, my arms, my chest, was all
that I could hear in all-encroaching blackness
till from that impenetrable murk I burst
free, in a clearing, rock-crags under sky!
I climb the cairn at the center of this field
at the center of the forest—there, above
Orion's shoulders, the whole vast turning sky
alight with planets, constellations, stars,
a milky wash of dots banding the heavens
where, as I watch, light from the faintest,
farthest sources mingles with the flecks
from nearer stars, and closer still the sudden
streaking meteors, the Perseids showering
lines of light that fade as soon as seen,
the nearest briefest, the farthest infinitely old
—Time made visible as space, contained
in my stunned gaze that holds at once
the end and the beginning and the black
blankness of the unlit nothing that precedes
the first, the earliest, the oldest light.

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KERMIT MOYER

Chiaroscuro

I sit in the skiff with my arms on my knees, the oars momentarily suspended, and watch carefully, expectantly, as the darkness grows progressively paler. The black wreath of shadow surrounding the pond has already given way to the familiar outlines of trees and houses, and now, in incremental stages, comes the gradual return of color. Greens mostly, but also browns, the fire-engine red of a beached canoe, the pale orange of day lilies clustering at the lowest crook of a wooden staircase that zigzags up to one of the cottages in the woods above the pond. The slender stalks of the day lilies rise up from a thick tuft of grassy fronds and at the end of each stalk the long, furled buds project like so many pointing fingers. I always thought they got their name because they close up at night, but Brian says no, it's because each flower blooms for one day only. Yesterday's blossoms won't open today. They're trumpet-shaped, so sturdy and brassy and deep-throated, so much less delicate-looking than most other flowers, that Brian's explanation sounds unlikely. But I believe him. It's just the sort of thing he'd know.

As daylight comes on, the darkness appears to dissolve, but the idea occurs to me that perhaps, in the presence of light, the darkness merely contracts into the smallest possible granules of itself and then waits there patiently, like a myriad of invisible spores, until it can bloom again. Far from clarifying anything, daylight might only obscure the darkness that still swims there in front of our eyes. If I said this to Brian he'd assume I was joking and probably laugh, and if I persisted he'd go into his observational mode, reading my every remark as some kind of psychological symptom. But the darkness really and finally is indestructible, isn't it? Only its form changes. For example, right now, the brighter the sunlight gets, and the clearer the

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sky, the more everything is everywhere torn and riddled with shadow.

The water is incredibly still, as smooth as the glossy surface of a photograph, but at just this moment there's the slight flutter of a breeze and—heralded not by the lilting whistle of a cardinal, as one might wish, but by the raucous cawing of a crow—the new day commences. Ripples shirr the surface of the pond, and the intricate, inverted world that was so convincingly pictured there along the edge of the water only a moment before, vanishes, reappears, vanishes again. Off to my left, the crow struts up and down a spit of sand.

I've begun to drift toward a flat, silver-gray square of weathered wood that is a neighbor's diving raft and that, to me, is somehow like the bubble in a carpenter's level, defining the water's perfect horizontal plane. When I dip my right oar in the water and make a circling movement with the blade to stabilize myself against the slight surface current created by the breeze, the skiff pivots me slowly toward the dark windows of Brian's aunt's summer cottage. We drove in from Boston yesterday afternoon, and this will be our home for the next two weeks, at which point Anna, who is an anthropology professor, will return from her work with the Hopi Indians in Arizona, and we (Brian and I and our five-year-old son Sean) will return to the scene of our regular lives in the Maryland suburbs outside of Washington, D.C., where Brian will presumably continue to practice optometry, and where I will presumably continue to work part-time on my master's degree in art history, and where Sean will presumably enter kindergarten in the fall. Sarah would have started the third grade.

I've made a pact with myself not to think the words *Sarah would have*, but it's a pact I can't help breaking—sometimes, like now, almost inadvertently, and other times with the deliberate intention of making the pain as sharp and specific as possible. Ordinarily, it's diffuse, and vaguely abdominal, as if some essential pillar down in the visceral foundation of myself had collapsed and now all the neural and moral fiber that was left had to clench and regroup itself around the hollow place. Mostly, I try to stay detached, be objective. Or rather I try to reconcile myself to the fact of my own disconnection. Brian says it's like I've got a secret I'm unwilling to share. I know what he's

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driving at, but he hasn't quite got it. It's not that I'm unwilling. It's just that if there is a secret, it's this sense of disconnection, and since any communication depends on a belief in at least the possibility of connectedness, the secret is unsayable by definition. If I try to tell Brian this, he shakes his head and says I'm intellectualizing again, denying my feelings by making everything abstract. According to Brian, abstraction is my favorite strategy of avoidance. Brian says I've got to gain access to my feelings of anger and fear. For him, feelings are the key to reality, the bottom line. But there are feelings and then there is the truth, and the truth is that feelings don't count for very much. You could say that the secret he wants me to share is precisely what makes sharing impossible. Isn't there a play by Ionesco or someone in which one of the characters is thought to be mad because he's convinced that they're all merely characters acting out a play?

The day before we left for this Cape Cod vacation—our first in two years and the first time without Sarah—it was Friday afternoon and Sean was taking his nap. I was going through some books stacked on the floor of the hall closet, and I came across *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which had been a gift to Sarah from my mother. For some reason, I opened the cover, and when I saw Sarah's name on the first page, crayoned so neatly in practiced lower-case letters, each letter drawn with a different colored crayon—a blue "s," a red "a," then green, red again, and yellow—I felt such a sudden and stabbing ache in the palms of my hands that I caught my breath and nearly dropped the book. As I stood there trembling, tears brimming in my eyes and the palms of my hands throbbing, the feeling came over me that I was poised on the verge of some momentous revelation. And I thought: no, if this is what it has all been for, it's not enough, I won't take it. At that moment a shift in the light made me turn and look down the hall toward the kitchen, and there, in three-quarter profile, was Sarah herself, sitting at the kitchen table in the flowered Laura Ashley nightdress that was her favorite, her head tilted and her lips compressed in her usual pose of concentration, printing her name, I knew—and there was nothing strange about my knowing it—in the very book I was holding. When she laid down the crayon she'd been using and paused to choose another, I called out her name, and when

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instead of answering me directly she bent her head a little lower over the page—a familiar sign that she was purposefully ignoring me—I called again, *Sarah, Sarah*, my insides lurching toward her even though I was afraid to move. I wasn't so much trying to get her attention as simply chanting her name and repeating, *thank God, thank God*, when she evidently finished printing the last letter, because she laid her crayon down—it was the yellow one—and she finally turned toward me. And just as her head lifted, there was another change in the light, as if the wind had blown the branches of a tree outside the kitchen window, and before her eyes could meet mine, I saw that what I was looking at wasn't Sarah at all but a pattern of leaf shadow on the wall behind the table. I ran down the hall and in a glance took in the whole empty kitchen, then stepped out the door and saw that she wasn't in the back yard either.

Even then I think I knew that what I had seen must have been some kind of hallucination, desire and memory playing tricks with the light. But her presence had been so convincing. I hadn't been looking at a mere image of Sarah but at Sarah herself, autonomous and real. And so it wasn't simply like being tricked. It was the loss of her all over again. I was supposed to be getting ready for our vacation, gathering our books together with the games and toys that Sean would be taking along, organizing the food we'd need for the two-day car trip, doing a preliminary pack. I'd gotten to the point where I was okay if I was performing some specific task. Brian had given me a list, not only things I needed to do but also the sequence in which I ought to do them. When I came in from the back yard and sat down at the kitchen table, I couldn't resist reaching out and stroking the place where I had seen Sarah printing her name. I still held *The Velveteen Rabbit* with my finger tucked inside the cover. It was like the piece of evidence in a movie that tells you the impossible dream from which the character has just awakened must have really happened. I opened the book to look at Sarah's name again, and the next moment I was clawing at the page, ripping it out and tearing it into little pieces, then ripping out the next page and the next and the one after that, furious at the dumb persistence of what was only paper after all, paper and ink and a few crayon marks. But then, sitting there in front of those torn pages, I realized that all I'd done was to destroy a

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unique and irreplaceable treasure, and I began frantically searching for all the bits of paper with the crayoned letters of Sarah's name on them. I thought I might at least piece that page together again and save it, in fact the idea had ignited a feeling of possibility in me, and I was working happily away at the puzzle when I tasted the salty wetness of tears on my lips and discovered that I was actually crying and that beneath my enrapt concentration was the knowledge that the page didn't matter, the crayon marks, Sarah's name, the relic I might reconstruct. None of it mattered. How could it? It wouldn't be Sarah. And at that moment, as I licked the tears from my lips and let the bits of paper sift through my fingers, something that had been holding on inside of me finally let go. That was the moment of true surrender, not the last minutes with Sarah in the hospital, not going home for the first time afterwards, not the funeral, not even the cemetery with its raw hole in the ground. Those had been occasions of grief, but this was a crossing over to grief's other side. It was as if I had slipped free of gravity. When I was thirteen, I broke my wrist roller-skating and had to wear a plaster cast for six weeks and I remember that when they took the cast off, my arm seemed, of its own accord, to rise into the air. This was a similar sensation, but instead of feeling fragile I felt unbreakable, reduced to something indivisible and elemental. I wiped the tears from my cheeks, threw the torn pages into the trash, and was back at my original project of sorting through a stack of books and games in the hall closet when Sean woke up from his nap a few minutes later.

Sean has a sweet, buoyant nature. His natural impulse has always been to trust the world and to go along with its intentions—just as Sarah's was always to question and resist. But when we discovered that Sarah was sick, and then especially as her strength began to deteriorate in the final months, she turned into the mild, pliable one, and Sean became what my grandmother would have called "contrary." Because he looks to other people for his emotional cues, he's always tended to reflect whatever's going on around him, and over the past year, not surprisingly, he's become increasingly moody and apprehensive.

When I walked into his room that afternoon, he was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the transformer of his

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electric train set. The two wires that connected the transformer to the track made him look like he was about to blow the whole thing to kingdom come. "Look, Mommy," he said. "It's going to Cape Cod." He was wearing a pair of light corduroy shorts and a blue T-shirt, and his hair—so much thicker than Sarah's, almost as blond as Brian's but with a slight curl—was still matted and tousled from his nap. A familiar surge of longing and gratitude rose up in me at the sight of him: a desire to hold him close, stroke his head, feel his plump little arms and legs twist and turn against me, and a simultaneous and contradictory pride in his separateness, in his independent right to push me away. But now these feelings seemed to coalesce not inside of me but somewhere off in the distance. I was looking at Sean from some future in which we were already gone, as much a ghost myself as Sarah had been, a ghost come back to revisit this passing scene we had once taken so for granted.

"Did you have a good nap?" I heard myself ask. I sounded cheerful but the very familiarity of the question gave it a terrible poignancy somehow.

"Uh-huh," Sean said. And then, "Look, Mommy. Watch how fast I can go." He turned the dial on the transformer a little way and the train picked up speed. He seemed very careful, very absorbed. Leaning over to one side, he watched the way the wheels swiveled under the carriage to keep the oversized wooden locomotive on track as it went around a corner.

"If you run it too fast, won't it derail?" I asked, trying to sound the proper note of caution.

"You just have to watch out for the turns," he said in his father's patient, explanatory tone. Then he looked up at me, all himself again, and smiled. "But wrecks are cool," he said. *Cool* was a word he'd picked up from Sarah. "Want to see a wreck?"

"Sure," I said. "But don't things get broken in wrecks?"

"In a real one they would," he nodded. "They sure would in as real one like this." And so saying he picked up a wooden school bus with little peg people in the seats and set it down directly across the tracks. I'd seen Sean and Sarah play with it countless times before, Sean steering the bus from place to place while Sarah took care of the peg children, giving them names and high, piping little voices, making sure they got on and off at the appropriate stops. "Their engine stalled," Sean

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explained. His eyes shifted from where the school bus straddled the track to where the locomotive was rounding the final curve. "Okay," he said. He gave the transformer dial a hard twist. "Here comes the train—"

The collision didn't actually make much noise, just the knock and clatter of wood against wood, but the locomotive was derailed and the overturned school bus scattered peg children everywhere. Sean sat rocking back and forth with his hands on his knees, his elbows sticking out like wings. "That was a really good one," he said in a thoughtful voice. "I bet every kid on that school bus would've got smashed to bits. Every single one."

The idea seemed to give him an odd sort of satisfaction. He evidently didn't want any survivors. But then I thought why should he? Wasn't total annihilation more equitable and fair? Why, for instance, should he have been spared and not Sarah? How could he ever hope to repay a debt like that? The night after Sarah died, when I was tucking him into bed, he'd asked me whether he was going to die now too, like the prayer said—"If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take"—and I'd lied to him. No, I'd said, holding him in my arms, stroking the back of his head, no, baby, there's nothing to worry about, nothing's going to happen to you. But he'd remained silent, his body stiff and resistant, unconvinced. Now, as he crouched beside the track realigning the complicated wheels of the locomotive after its derailment, I thought I saw another way to save him, a way to cancel his impossible survivor's debt after all, and I heard myself say, "Just now, while you were taking your nap, I saw Sarah." Because if Sarah could come back again, then there was no debt for him to pay.

Sean turned toward me with a confused, wary look on his face.

"She was sitting at the kitchen table," I said. The undramatic ordinariness of the image seemed to confirm its truth and at the same time to render it completely harmless. I bent down, set the wooden school bus upright again, and began gathering up the peg children one by one and sticking them back into their slotted places just as though nothing unusual had happened, as though we'd known all along that Sarah might show up some day unexpectedly. We'd told Sean that people who died never came back, but maybe he'd think we'd only said that to keep him from getting his hopes up, the way we'd cautioned him not

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to expect the video games that, against our better judgment, we'd ended up giving him for Christmas.

"Where is she? Where'd she go?" he said. He'd been stunned for a moment but he was on his feet now, moving toward the door.

"She's not there anymore," I said. I took one of his hands in both of mine. "She was just here for a minute. I think she came to let us know she was all right."

"But when can I see her? Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I didn't have a chance," I said, telling him the simple truth. "It happened too fast. One second she was there and the next second she was gone." Saying the words seemed almost to conjure Sarah back again. "She was wearing the long nightdress she liked so much and writing her name in one of her books," I said. Were Sean and I any more real now than she had been then? From the perspective of the future, we were all just phantoms, and I thought it might release Sean if he could see that too.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"What?"

"The book."

"She took it with her," I told him, wanting to keep things simple.

But Sean is like Brian, his first interest is always in knowing the mechanics of how things work. Visiting Brian's office, Sarah would always stare at the people in the waiting room and try to guess who they were and what they did, but Sean might not notice them at all—instead, he'd be fascinated by the way Brian uses a projector and two mirrors to put the eye chart twenty feet away from the patient in the chair. "You mean she can take things *back* with her?" he asked me.

"I don't know. I guess so," I told him. "Or maybe she brought the book with her. Maybe some things can be here with us in our world and there with her in hers at the same time. Maybe it doesn't have to be one way or the other."

"It doesn't?"

"No," I said. I turned him toward me and knelt down so I could look directly into his puzzled eyes. "Listen," I said. "Who lives, who dies—it all ends up the same. It happens to all of us. Do you see? You don't have to worry." What I wanted to tell

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him had seemed so clear to me before. "Everything's going to be all right," I said, and then I repeated, "You don't have to worry."

"I *kno-ow*," he said. "I'm not a baby." And then he abruptly put his arms out and began making airplane noises, seesawing from side to side. "I'm an F-15," he said. "On a mission." He pulled away from me and charged off across the room in a slight crouch, his arms extended.

"Sean, listen to me," I said. He was sputtering around the electric-train track now, seemingly oblivious but still listening, I knew, still taking everything in. "Let's not tell Daddy about Sarah, okay?" I said. "We'll keep it"—I started to say *a secret*, but that seemed the wrong word, so I said—"a surprise. Like a Christmas gift, all right?"

He didn't answer. He was coming in low over the wooden school bus now, his outstretched arms cantilevered for the descent, making the rapid *uh-uh-uh-uh* sound of a machine gun and also making sure, I could tell, as he carefully zeroed in on the little peg children, that there would be absolutely no chance of anyone surviving.

I don't mean to be too hard on Brian in all of this. It's just that since Sarah died I've begun to resent his certainty and his way of handling everything with such single-minded therapeutic intention. For Brian, the famous five stages of grief are just stopping points on an itinerary that, bleak though it may be, is simply the most efficient way of getting you where you want to go. The fourth stage, Depression, the stage that comes before Acceptance, took him the longest, from Halloween until after the New Year. But then that was it, he was readjusted. Which is actually what he calls it himself.

Sarah died exactly one year ago today. At eleven minutes after four in the morning, during that hour of legendary darkness they say comes just before the dawn. So tonight I got quietly out of bed at a little after four and came out here on the pond so I could be close to the sky. When I passed Sean's room, I thought of waking him and bringing him with me—he was so good on the whole long trip up here, not a word to Brian about our surprise—but then as I stood outside his door I heard an owl hoot somewhere off in the woods and I decided not to, I'm

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not sure why. Maybe because, ungenerously, I want to keep Sarah for myself, or maybe because, like a bird watcher, I'm afraid that too much commotion, too much talk and movement, might scare her away. So I've come alone. Since now I know that we are all, every one of us, ghosts, mere momentary phantoms of light and shadow, the impervious membrane that used to separate the dead from the living, the night from the day, has come to seem more permeable than I ever thought possible. Tonight, waiting for Sarah has been a careful scanning attention to what isn't even there yet, a little like watching for a shooting star.

Of course, with another part of my mind, I know that it wasn't really Sarah I saw sitting at the kitchen table. I know how Brian would explain it to me. What I saw, he'd say, was a kind of hologram produced by the cooperation of my optic thalamus, the flickering light on the kitchen wall, and an intense emotional memory triggered by my seeing Sarah's name crayoned in a book my own mother had given her. Which is all very likely, I'll admit. But why couldn't that precise conjunction of factors just as easily have produced a real event? The proper combination is dialed, the tumblers fall into place, and the lock springs open. Why not? And if it can happen once, why not again? Is it denial to believe that such things are possible, or is it denial not to? Brian would say the answer is as plain as day, but how plain is that? Watching the light come on this morning, and watching all the time for Sarah, that's one of the things I've been trying to discover.

The pond is much longer than it is wide; it narrows at the middle to form two sections, less like an hourglass than like the two lenses of a pair of glasses. Anna teaches in Boston and lives here off and on year round, but she usually does fieldwork of some kind for a month each summer. The house is full of Indian artifacts she's brought back from these summer projects: beautiful quilled leather vests, feathered tomahawks and lances, bone necklaces and horn amulets and an elaborately painted medicine wheel with eight eagle feathers dangling from it. For Anna, I know, the vanished past is much more real, more substantial and powerful, than the ephemeral present can ever hope to be. I've heard her say that the present is merely a puppet on a string and the past is the hand it's tied to. She has

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arched eyebrows that give her a perennial air of being pleasantly surprised, and she loves to tease Brian about his faith in the scientific method, even though he constantly points out that she's a social scientist herself. Last year excepted, we've been coming here for a week or two every summer since Sarah was born, and we usually manage to see Anna at one end of our visit or the other. Sarah used to say that this pond was her favorite place in the whole wide world and that Anna was a good witch. Sarah believed that Anna had picked up magical powers from the Indian tribes she's studied, and it was a belief that Anna never tried to discourage. The far end of the pond, the other lens as it were, is uninhabited and wild, edged all around with scrub pine, dogwood, maple, and a gnarly native undergrowth that is tough and wiry and virtually impenetrable. According to Anna, the Plains Indians believe that each place is inhabited by its own presiding spirit, and I believe it too, because the spirit of this place is palpable, utterly independent of changes in the light or the weather. Whenever Sarah and I would come over here in the canoe we'd always find ourselves whispering. Sarah would sit in the front of the canoe, and I would sit in the rear.

"Look, Mommy," Sarah whispers now.

The sun has already risen above the low tree line into a sky that is clear but hazy, more white than blue. The diffused light gives everything a pearly glow. Sitting in the bow of the canoe, Sarah is pointing to where a collapsed portion of the bank has caused a tree to fall into the water. A turtle has climbed up onto the trunk and is poised there motionlessly, no doubt waiting for breakfast, its small head delicately projecting out from under its oversized helmet of a shell. When I lift the long paddle from the water it comes up with a loud splash, and as I hold it dripping in the air the turtle shifts position, plops into the water on the other side of the tree, and is abruptly gone from sight. But Sarah is still here, sitting with her back to me, her light brown hair drawn back into a short ponytail and held with a red elastic ruffle. On the back of her T-shirt I can read the names of the cities on Paul Simon's *Graceland* tour: New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C.

"We must have scared him," I say. Although I am completely calm, completely collected, I want very much for Sarah to turn and look at me. More than anything, I want to see her face. But

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she's holding the canoe's other paddle, dipping it to the left side as I dip mine to the right, each of us balancing the other's stroke so that we glide straight and true, and since she can't look back at me without turning awkwardly in her seat and disrupting the harmony of our movements, I don't ask her to. A light breeze has sprung up, sharp with the salt smell of the ocean just a few miles to our east, and I'm unsurprised to notice that the morning has become almost dazzlingly bright, the sky blue and cloudless. At the nape of Sarah's neck, stray wisps of hair flash and gleam in the sunlight.

"Look how dark," Sarah says, pointing into the intricate depths of the leafy woods drifting along beside us.

"Yes," I say, not taking my eyes off her. For just a moment, as she points, I catch a glimpse of her face in profile, and I'm exhilarated by the sweet delicacy of its girlish beauty but exhilarated even more by its familiarity, by the sheer unarguable fact of its being so absolutely Sarah's. And then the moment passes. She turns away again, and, losing nothing more than that glimpse of her face, I feel immediately bereft, although once again the feeling occurs not so much in me as in a circumscribed space off to the side somewhere, a sort of vessel I'm holding. Feelings no longer seem to define me—or anything else, except themselves. I am merely their witness. Disconnected, without either hope or hopelessness, I observe their passage the way you might watch waves unfolding at the beach, each one rushing up the sand and then washing back out again, leaving behind a new pattern of debris, and new treasures for those, like myself, who collect such things. This detachment, this elemental invulnerability—or at least the eyes to see it with—has been Sarah's gift to me, I know. But perhaps it's not a gift that's mine to share—not with Brian, not with Sean, not with anyone. If I tried to pass it on to Brian, he'd just be convinced that I'd found another tactic of denial. And Sean—God only knows that Sean must have thought, what he must still be thinking. But as unsharable and incommunicable as this visionary gift may be, it's the truth nonetheless. I know that in my bones. It's truer certainly than what, for most of us, passes for love, because it is forever uncorrupted by love's hunger and fear of loss and damaging desperation. And because, unlike

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love, it has nothing to do with feelings. It stands by unmoved while whole crowds of feelings blindly stumble past.

"Let's bring a lily back for Daddy and Sean," Sarah says. She's lifted her paddle and is pointing it across the water toward the narrow passage into the other section of the pond. A whole armada of lily pads is anchored there—great, vaguely heart-shaped vessels the size of dinner plates, many of them carrying a single white lotus-like flower.

At that moment, looking at the lilies, I'm struck by how much we're able to give to one another after all, and it occurs to me that this, as much as the lilies themselves, is really what Sarah wants me to see: the great abundance of what is still there to be given. According to the Plains Indians, I remember, our spirits are nourished not by what we manage to hold onto but by what we give away. I can count fourteen lilies, each one about the size and shape of two hands cupped together in prayer. When we take one back for Brian and Sean, we'll let it float free in one of Anna's large Pueblo bowls.

I turn to tell Sarah this, but just as I do we enter the shadow of a passing cloud, and I must be momentarily disoriented by the shift in the light because I no longer see Sarah in front of me. In fact, I'm looking out over the stern of the skiff, and instead of a paddle I'm holding two oars in my hands. I twist around and look behind me, but Sarah isn't in the bow of the boat either. Ahead, the line of cloud shadow has reached the water lilies, and as the air darkens they seem to become even brighter and more luminous, like so many paper lanterns set floating out from shore.

Then the cloud passes and in the abrupt brilliance of the sunlight the lilies seem to shrink slightly into themselves. I turn back to face the stern, dip the blades of my oars into the water as deeply as I can, and lean into the pull. Before my backward-gazing eyes, the vacant expanse of water widens, and the dark diagonal of the fallen tree, where only moments ago we had seen the turtle disappear, gradually recedes. I'm facing backward, but as I lift and dip the oars, moving them in circle after sunlit circle now, I can feel the skiff gliding steadily forward, carrying me blindly, but surely, toward the lilies, and toward the narrow passage to the other side.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

My Corporate Life

10:30: Morning Break

"So Steve just wants to get ahead. Who don't?"
That's how Sam needled Jennifer that day.
It was Wednesday, the hump of every week.
Her luckless eyes remote, her manner gruff,
Poor Jenny spread her bagel with cream cheese
And sat up straight in a backless bucket chair
(the plastic back punched out). She wished for silence
But Sam was on a roll, the know-it-all.

"He wants to run a project, be a boss,
Do lunch with all the top dogs from New York,"
He says as Jenny lights a cigarette.
Sam sticks two fingers out and says "Me, too."
She pushes the pack across the particle board.

"I thought you quit," she says.
Sam grimaces
And wreathes his face in conspiratorial smoke.
"You know, we oughtta trash this joint," he murmurs.

"That's swell," Jen says, and pushes back to go.

"Come on, sit down! Let's take another five.
No, wait! Is that a brown smudge on your nose?"

11:45: The Copy Center

"Not everybody runs a xerox well,"
Says Sam. He strokes his polyester sleeve
As Mimi tries to find an auditron.

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"I'll look," he says, and drops down on his knees
To peek once up her dress. He talks too fast.
"This copier is tough—it's a *machine*."
He hears in Mimi's voice the drone of work
As she replies
"That's right, it's a machine."
Then Zeke walks in. She feels her face turn red
And will not meet his eyes. She rushes off.
Zeke watches her tight ass, her hurried stride,
Then focuses on Sam's butt sticking out.

"Get up, you jerk," he barks.
Sam bumps his head
And tries to speak, but nothing clear breaks through.
"Oh, save it, dork," Zeke says. "Fifteen of this."
He bombs the xerox lid with a huge report.

"Tomorrow be ok?" Sam asks.
Zeke stares
As if Sam were a reeking garbage can.
"Try thirty minutes, son." Sam hates that sneer
But sags and quasimodos to his task
While Zeke turns crisply on a wingtipped heel
And quick-steps to his post inside the maze.
Anarchic Sam turns servile till quitting time.

1:00 P.M.

It's lonely in the Annex. Steve chews gum
While glancing over temporary walls.
In makeshift, shoebox offices the writers
Read clotted passages and scribble notes.
Steve watches as Kate doodles in green ink,
Then steps around her wall and says *Aha!*
She gasps and jumps a little in her chair.
Steve says he's sorry, sits down at her side
And thumbs through papers, messing up her desk.

"Please stop!" she says. "Which stem starts out best?"
And picking up a sheet she quickly reads:

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So, *which of these perhaps most likely happens,*
Or *which of these most likely happens next?*

"Beats me," Steve says. "It's awful either way."

"That's great," Kate says. "It's aimed at seventh grade."

They see Jim enter, dragging toward his desk.
He sits down heavily and packs his case
As if he's in a trance, then tidies up
And stands as if deciding where to go.
He stops to say goodbye to Steve and Kate.

"They let me go," he says. "I finished up
My section of the project ahead of schedule."

"That's rotten," Kate declares.
Steve checks his watch.
"That's tough luck, Bucko, but we've got to run."
Kate reprimands him with an acid look,
But Steve just smiles. "The meeting," he reminds her.
Jim knows the score. He nods and goes away
As Kate looks like she might break down and cry.
"A couple of doughnuts will pick you up," Steve says.

2:30: The Meeting

The conference room must flower with their thought
If their evil competition will be crushed—
Or so Director Sain (ironic name!)
Would have them believe. He builds them up at first,
Then defers to his ambitious underling
Who happily announces plans to cut
Their health insurance. Employees squirm a bit,
But take the news like children of defeat.
Steve sits up straight, attempting to impress,

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As Kate's expression darkens like a bubble
Filled in sadly with a #2 pencil,
An untouched doughnut on a paper plate
In front of her. Zeke strokes his razor chin
And leers at Mimi, who holds a scream inside.
Sam sweats and fidgets, anxious for a smoke
While Jenny wonders why she needs this job.

The moment pre-arranged, Director Sain
Stands up, approachable as a Christmas ham;
His Friday, in a domineering voice,
Announces that the meeting is adjourned.
As Sain moves toward the door his workers part
Though some, like pets, are ecstatic if he deigns
To pause for a private word.
Outside the compound
The Annex people slowly make their way
Back to their desks where all the products lay.
No glances are exchanged, nobody speaks,
Though all are chewing earnestly on this:
More benefits have just been swept away.
Back at their desks all eyes seek out the clocks;
The day is dying, but never fast enough.

After Five

Safe in his car Steve cranks the tapedeck up,
Fast-forwards to the track he really needs—
Sinatra crooning *My Way*. The tone is right
For gaining speed and getting on the highway.
Steve warms up the challenge, bearing down
As traffic thickens north around the bay.
He whips from lane to lane without concern;
The other drivers get out of his way.

"It's just the same at work," Steve tells himself,
And thinks of how his cohorts put in time

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Without a master plan. Too bad for them.

I've traveled each and every . . .
Enough of that.
Sinatra is ejected, and in his place
Another *My Way* screeches, covers him.
Sid Vicious leads, and Steve screams right along:

I killed a cat out in the driveway! . . .

In his garage Steve slowly comes back down,
And when the sweat he drove up in has cooled
He numbs himself with whiskey, sees the kids
(who seem more alien each grinding day),
And greets his wife with a waxy peck on the cheek.
The two exchange inconsequential news,
Then lapse into exhaustion's frosty silence—
Another evening anchored by TV.
Before he sleeps Steve fights the urge to doubt:
How might his life improve if he ever quit?
Quit what? Himself? His job or family?

"Fat chance," he tells himself, "and no regrets."

All the Broken Boys and Girls

The attic air was thick with summer heat
As Jacob cursed his legs so long asleep.
Immobilized, spreadeagled on the floor,
He licked the sweat that pooled above his lip
And thought he heard massed spiders suffocating
Up under the eaves. Even the dust smelled dead,
As dead as his defenses must have been
When guys who never spoke to him sat down
Where he was eating lunch.
"You busy on Friday?"

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Their locker room leader began. "We talked it over,
And we decided you should get out more,
You know, have fun and meet some other kids.
Hey, take it easy, Jake. You want a coke?
Go get our buddy here another drink."

At home his folks were happy with the news,
And Friday night the boys appeared on time
To fold his chair up, pack it in the trunk,
And help him in the back between two girls
Who fussed and giggled, leaning into him
So heavily he labored to catch his breath.
The house was a reprieve, all noise and shadows,
Where he could find a corner, sip his drink,
And watch the lucky dancers burn the time
With movements he could only dream about.
He also wondered why he'd entered this—
The parents gone, the liquor cabinet
Thrown open, seductive as a music box.
Encouraged by the beat of the Rolling Stones,
The boys soon flushed him from his hiding place.

"Don't act like furniture," their leader said,
And drunkenly took hold of Jacob's arm.
"Come on, let's dance!" he yelled, and hauled the boy
From his chair into the center of the room.
The others parted, laughing as they gave way,
Some pointing at Jacob's independent legs
That flopped in all directions as they dragged
Across the carpet like a roughed up doll's,
His face and shoulders leaning heavily
Against the chest of the boy who held him fast.
The blood rushed to his face, his eyes teared up,
And Jacob pleaded with the boy to stop.
The song like a demented light snapped off,
Another started up, and goaded on
The boys bore Jacob up the attic stairs—
"To cool off with the other broken junk,"
One boy announced.

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"Hey, Jacob, here's your date!"—
A dresser's dummy without arms or legs—
And laughing, shoving, rioted back downstairs.

A long time passed before the victim moved,
His face on one side pressed against the floor
Like God's ear turned to music thudding through clouds.
At last he struggled, resolved to take a step,
And muscled up against unfinished walls.
He rubbed his elbows, sides, and shoulders raw
But tried repeatedly until one step,
Though leaden in its arc, encouraged him;
Another drove his face into the floor.
A lull came over him. He lay quite still
And wondered what his keepers did below.
He saw them in a circle, leaning back
To laugh and gawk at him through see-thru specks—
The kind once advertised in comic books.
In time the drink and boredom pulled them down;
They slept—a room of serviceable limbs.

Then Jacob saw himself go through the floor
To walk across the ceiling over them—
The former cripple as agile as Fred Astaire
And just as magical. Then one by one
They woke up speechless at the sight of him.
They woke up different, too, unable to move.
Immaculate above, he studied them
As they stared back at him like hungry fish.
Then Jacob raised his hand.
The doors swung back,
Crisp orderlies in white pushed wheelchairs in
And roughly loaded up the paralyzed.
Though handled like dead meat, they didn't resist
Or turn their eyes from his.
He read their thoughts:
We are afraid. We don't deserve this fate.

There's little difference, Jacob told himself,

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Between the walkers and riders, the keepers and kept.
The vision faded. He was back again,
Beside the dresser's dummy as rigid as time,
Indifferent to any alteration,
Insensitive to the simplest choices now.
The music downstairs bullied up a notch,
And Jacob heard loud voices from the stair.
He pushed up on his arms to try again.

Their Fathers and Mothers Were Drinkers

His mother sang with her sister,
Her mother skipped out to the clubs;
Their fathers disappeared early
Like discarded ticket stubs.

They took those desertions inside them
And pitied their mothers the more,
Because they had chosen so badly
And would never escape the ground floor.

In time the mens' faces grew hazy,
And even their mothers went dark.
They might have been sister and brother
That day they confessed in the park.

At the dance his own drink took over;
Slipping he cracked his head.
Did she think of mother and father?
Did he manage to bring back the dead?

Enough to sober them both
On the chances they might take
Walking out in their parents' shadows,
New partners in sweet heartache.

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At a diner they drank bitter coffee
And talked to repair the night,
Each exploring the other's story
For the twist that would make theirs right.

The Travelers

Because we love the stars
We walk out late to gaze at them.
Because we love the night
We put it on and will not come away.
The stars, the night,
Are all the substance of our thought.
No suffering cries out,
No death comes near,
As Time continues on its way
Remote beneath the stars,
Inside the open night.

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S. OSO

Lessons

In the fifties, seven blocks of South Thirteenth Street in the center of downtown Philly educated me. This strip began at Chestnut Street with Blum's—an apparel store good enough for the Main Line ladies—and ended at South Street—the hub of the black ghetto. Between these extremes South Thirteenth's pedestrian traffic sustained three laundries—one of which was my father's Ace Laundry and Cleaners—two barbershops, a florist, three large hotels of various modes, an antiquarian bookdealer, four restaurants of diverse ambiences, a braille publisher, a Catholic and a high Episcopal church, fifteen or so bars many of which made up Philadelphia's Combat Zone, a friary, a savings and loan, a jeweler and John Wanamaker's—Philadelphia's largest department store. Sometimes I was able to get inside these establishments, as in the case of Wanamaker's, and wander about unnoticed as I tried to make sense of the objects and processes in front of me. Most, however, were too small to accommodate an unattended kid so I had to content myself with peering through the windows at the displays and the goings-on inside.

In addition to smatterings of individual businesses—barbering, flower arranging, bookselling, banking, etc.—I learned a system. The people inside the shops had mastered those businesses and, consequently, were able to make their ways in the world. In doing so these people patronized one another. Although I couldn't relate to the religious, political and interpersonal systems presented for my consumption, the system of economic interdependence resonated rationality. I was eager to participate and realized that I needed to choose one of these businesses for more thorough scrutiny. The business I was to learn the most thoroughly belonged to Julius Frankel.

Julius Frankel—a.k.a. Jay Dash, Dance Teacher to the

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Stars—rented both the second and third floors over the Mid-City Sandwich Shop between Walnut and Sansom on Thirteenth. Most of the buildings housing small and medium stores contained second and third floors which, if not residential as in the case of father's, went for more recondite services such as diamond cutting or private detecting. On an errand for father or to and from school I might pass the building rented to the sandwich shop and Jay Dash as often as five times a day. Next to the first floor sandwich shop entrance stood Jay's separate glass door, across which a sign painter had splashed his name and calling. I stared into that small foyer of full-length mirrors. Past the last mirror the stairwell turned out of sight, so I had to settle for wondering what a "dance teacher to the stars" did. Since I hadn't learned all there was to know about the comparatively self-evident windows of the ground floor businesses, boredom hadn't converted curiosity to obsession about the unknown seconds and thirds. I did anticipate, however, at some point needing to peek into the unknown as I had already done at the doors of the windowless Combat Zone bars. Not knowing why exactly, I hoped that Jay Dash's would be smoky, dim and full of friendly women.

Assuming the unseen to be not as proper as the antiquarian bookseller or the barbershops, I was astounded one day when, as I was walking along Thirteenth with my mother, she pulled open that glass door to lead me into the unknown. A bit panicked, I wondered if I would like seeing mother in a smoky, dim room full of friendly women.

Mother had trained me to stay by her side so she didn't bother to see if I was behind until she got to the fourth or fifth step. "What's the matter with you? You're going to like this."

Apprehension had stopped me at the bottom of the steps, and I started to inspect them. Farther apart than other indoor stairwells, these steps were of concrete and, though recently painted, heavily scuffed. Because the stairs were slippery and steep, I held tightly to the wrought iron banister. Hoping to see the place where I was being taken, I looked toward the top of the stairs. But the stairway turned abruptly.

Backtracking several steps to where I had frozen, mother again implored, "What is the matter with you?" She reached out her hand. When I didn't take it, she grabbed me by the arm and

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dragged me up the stairs, around the abrupt turn, and up another flight.

Beat-up wood floors usurped the concrete at the top of the stairs. Patches of wall peeked out from around a thousand framed photos of intense poses with scrawls of "To Jay with best wishes," "Thanks for everything," "I couldn't have done it without you," "All love always." Beneath the pictures Naugahyde couches outlined two thousand square feet of unfilled space. Beside a second concrete stairwell a hanging bulb spotlighted a desk and several file cabinets. Behind the desk hazed by pipe smoke sat a thick-set man with pencil line mustache and wavy, too black hair receding in a straight line. "Hello, may I help you?"

Looking around her, mother said, "Yes, I spoke to you earlier."

"Oh yes, the lady from up the street," the man said, getting up and walking around the desk to extend his hand. "I'm Jay Dash." Looking down at me, he said, "So you're the dancer." He put out his hand to me.

What was this guy talking about when he called me "the dancer"? Since at nine I was programmed to be a gentleman, I had no choice but to accept his hand and shake it as firmly as I could.

Tamping his pipe and laying it aside, Jay said, "Why don't you two go upstairs while I get my piano player?"

As mother and I started up the second flight of concrete steps, I heard him yell "Ricky" several times.

Like the second floor landing, the third floor became wood as soon as the stairs stopped. Numerous nicks and gouges indicated heavier use than downstairs. Here, instead of the two thousand square feet being one big, empty area, two large rooms were further subdivided into several smaller, empty rooms.

Not knowing which room to choose, mother motioned me to wait. While standing at the top of the concrete, I heard loud clicking sounds approaching briskly. I turned around. The clicking came from Jay's feet now right behind us.

Catching my gawk at his feet, Jay said, "These are tap shoes, son. Your mom's going to get you a pair just like mine." Jay was good at ordering; he got his way most of the time, sometimes

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by being overbearing. Here, however, his manner was gentle but firm, as the trainer first worked the colt.

He led us into the large room that contained windows from which the four-foot, stainless steel letters of the Western Savings Fund Society sign could be seen. Off to one side an upright piano stood with its bench empty. Glancing at the empty bench, Jay shook his head and said, "Excuse me for one second." The clicks moved rapidly across the wooden floors to the head of the stairs. "Ricky, please! We're waiting for you."

Muffled speech came up the stairs. The muffled noise became louder as an obese gentleman waddled into view. He gave Jay a smirk and us a nod and sat down at the piano bench.

"Okay, son, now let's see what you can do," Jay said. He nodded toward Ricky. "Pick up."

Ricky played a few notes at the end of which Jay pointed to me.

I stood there bewildered.

Mother said, "Come on now. Do what you do all the time on South Street whenever we walk by that corner."

One of the white businesses that had remained after the black transition was the chicken plucker where mother took me shopping twice a week. On three of Thirteenth and South's corners were taverns, outside of which men congregated. Often they amused themselves by challenging one another to match steps. Whenever I saw one of these challenges in progress, I tried to participate—to mother's overwhelming disapproval but to the delight of participants and spectators. I didn't know that what I was aping was dancing.

"Okay, son, let's go again." Jay nodded to Ricky.

Even though I now knew what mother expected, I was still unable to respond. This wasn't the corner: no piano at the corner—garbage can lid and harmonica, at most; moreover, I could only match a step. I couldn't think of what to do on my own.

Mother now realized my problem and told Jay that I needed to match steps. That news didn't bother Jay. He clicked a few steps that I tried to copy. With Ricky's accompaniment, we repeated this process several times until he said, "He'll do fine. Have him here on Saturdays for the nine o'clock class." That

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interchange began seven years with Jay, seven years of establishing my place in the economy.

Tap dance lessons proved to be the only activity endorsed by both my family and me, a socialization I could tolerate. I hated public school, religious training and visits with relatives. My only interest until then had been wandering the neighborhood, trying to make sense out of all I was seeing. Taking me to Jay's, I soon figured out, was mother's way of turning what she considered unacceptable behavior—matching steps on a ghetto corner—into a middle-class activity. Every time Jay taught me a new step, I ran to South Street to show off.

I would witness that first interlude between a parent and Jay many more times. Sometimes a parent came in, as mother had, to say that she had noticed interest in her offspring. More often, however, the mother brought the child in after the child had studied several years at a different school. In the latter case Jay would say the child could be in any class he or she could keep up with as he allowed the mother to believe the child might be accomplished enough to enroll in a class more advanced than the nine o'clock, commonly called the baby class.

Believing all schools roughly equal, a mother would bring her child, who had completed three years, to Jay's twelve o'clock or fourth-year class. Overpowered by the fourth-year class, the child next week would try the eleven o'clock and so on until he or she showed up at the nine o'clock, which was still too advanced. Then Jay would arrange for one of his advanced students to tutor the new kid until the kid could keep up with the baby class.

The public's inability to distinguish good tap dancing from bad accounted for the discrepancy between Jay's and other dance schools. Tap dancing is the manipulation of the body to create rhythms when the feet strike the floor. Although the tap genre often incorporates gestures and movements common to other dance genres, sound is its defining attribute. No matter how graceful a dance gesture is, it isn't tap dancing unless it produces a sound; even soft-shoe creates noise. Much of what passes for tap dancing isn't tap dancing because the sounds the public hears are not being completely produced by the dancer but rather enhanced by a film studio sound effects department. Much of what passes for good tap dancing isn't, because the

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sounds produced by the feet striking the floor aren't organized and varied enough to be rhythmic. Understandably, otherwise competent parents were fooled when the movie-like maneuvers their children learned were labeled "tap dancing."

Jay, too, recognized the importance of graceful gesture but knew that grace would take care of itself once the student learned to balance while executing the sound-producing foot movements. When a student achieves body control, arms naturally swing from side to side. Leaps and turns add sophistication to a dance routine, but that routine is tap only if the feet produce a rhythm to accompany those movements. The mere sounds of shoe taps stepping to prepare for and land from a leap or a turn do not form a sequence sufficiently intricate and organized to be termed "rhythm."

By the end of the first year all of Jay's beginning students—some as young as six—had learned steps that used the six foot parts: toe-kick, toe-pull, toe-step (ball of the foot), toe-dig, heel, and flat (heel and step simultaneously). They learned how, unless the step called for a heel or a flat, to stay on the balls of their feet and, thereby increase speed. At the end of the first year they could all control their balance and, therefore, the weight changes that cause the steps to occur.

Notice I said "all." Because I was not at Jay's from opening to closing every day, I can't say for certain that he never turned anyone away as unteachable. But I never saw a child or even an adult whom Jay could not teach. His students included children who when they started with him confused right and left, tended to trip over their feet and/or were so obese they could barely walk.

To eliminate balance problems as well as to help keep everyone in sync, Jay made the students hold hands. The baby classes held hands the most, but Jay also used hand-holding in the advanced classes whenever a new step presented a balance problem. Since within every class ability differed, Jay used hand-holding to make the less accomplished keep up by being pushed and pulled in and out of position.

Dancers are supposed to be in sync not only with each other but also with the music. To save money, most schools used records for class accompaniment. Since the speed of prerecorded music is set, the student often had to pay more attention

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to keeping up with the music than perfecting the steps; moreover, many beginning students cannot start on the beat, much less synchronize their feet to sound.

After demonstrating a new step, Jay stopped at each student for that student to duplicate it. Still unsure of the exact foot positionings, the student, even if he understood the relation of the positionings to the music, would be unable to execute those positionings at the proper instant. Jay's pianist—usually Ricky—would overcome this inability by watching the student's feet and playing the appropriate notes until the student not only learned the positionings but could hear when the postionings were to occur.

Since Ricky could be unavailable, Jay was forever auditioning relief pianists. All were competent musicians, but few lasted more than three hours. Besides being unable to master synchronizing the music to the students, they were usually unable to shift tempo as immediately as Jay demanded. Jay made these demands known by pounding a cane on the floor at the tempo he now required. Ricky had been playing for Jay's classes long enough to know when the students were having trouble keeping to tempo and when they were mastering the steps so that the tempo needed to be increased. Moreover, Ricky had an inexhaustible repertoire appropriate for every tap situation. Nobody wanted to hear "Tiptoe through the Tulips" for hours on end.

The Jay Dash—Dance Teacher to the Stars—Dancing School ran on the star system. To Jay's undisputed star, Ricky played second banana. Jay had control of the dancing, but Ricky controlled the music. Since in Jay's world dancing required live music, control of the music often gave Ricky more control of the classes than Jay would have liked.

Jay wasn't taciturn. He could laugh. But he was mostly serious and, like most stars, tended to take himself too seriously. Jay could be very patient with a student struggling to master a step and very impatient with a student or a class whose class work betrayed a lack of practice. Ricky delighted in breaking tension by playing a few bars the opposite of Jay's mood or patronizingly dramatic. Sometimes Ricky relieved tension by making faces at the mothers sitting and watching their offspring. The mothers, in turn—needing release from

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Jay's scowl—exhaled bursts of laughter that caused a quietly infuriated Jay to glare at Ricky, who reciprocated with one of his most blasé expressions.

Born with an underdeveloped voice box, Ricardo Tedesco sounded like Elmer Fudd. Sounding like Elmer Fudd was an accomplishment for someone who hadn't been expected to produce any speech. In the course of learning to speak, he learned enough about sound to become a voice and piano teacher. Ricky used one of Jay's back rooms for a studio and recruited some of Jay's students. While Ricky's business enhanced Jay's, it also created friction between them. Since Saturday was the busy day for both, Ricky wasn't always available for Jay's classes.

Although Jay could be transparently full of show-biz blarney, his obvious level of accomplishment in itself substantiated most tales of a life spent in entertainment including a few Jolson shows. Emigrating to New York's Lower East Side as a child in the 1900s, Jay had hoofed as soon as he hopped off the boat. Neither mellifluous enough to sing nor handsome enough to be a lead, Jay could outdance everybody and always had chorus work, usually as first solo. Aware that no matter how well he danced, his stage life would be limited to the chorus, he concentrated on teaching. As soon as a new ballroom craze hit, Jay was teaching it. Several pictures from the twenties on the walls showed him teaching the Charleston before hundreds. When he got too old for both teaching and the sometimes twice daily chorus work, he gave up Broadway and opened a school in Philly.

Learning anything as well as I learned to tap dance requires one to be psyched up. Repetition for repetition's sake is impossible to sustain. Repetition includes not only the time spent in class but time spent perfecting what has been demonstrated in class. Jay stressed that every hour of class time required at least five hours' practice. To exceed this requirement, I moved my feet silently while sitting in public school and every free moment while at after-school jobs. My expectation to maintain this level of commitment was that, when I reached maturity, my shop would be show business. I'd fit into the system and, thus, be able to survive. Tap dancing seemed my best and most attainable option; furthermore, other things I

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had learned indicated I was in the right place to study this trade.

Complementing Jay's level of accomplishment was the show-biz pizzazz with which things were done at his school. Even Jay's occasional temperamental demands fit into the bigger than life mythos that produced the star caricature. At times the occasionally hostile collaboration between Jay and Ricky played out its own off-Broadway tale. But more than melodrama, it was the professionalism of the classes that reinforced my belief in the rightness of my choice.

Jay conducted the classes past beginner's like chorus lines. Each of these classes began with a warm-up consisting of maneuvers that the students had learned in the previous classes. At Jay's nod Ricky would pick-up, and Jay would do one step or a combination of steps. If the step had a name—triple time step, for instance—he'd call it out. Acknowledging his authority, the whole class matched while keeping intact the formation Jay had arranged. Satisfied that the step had been performed to snuff, Jay would jump out in front of the class with another step to be matched or maybe a combination based upon a previous part of the warm-up. This sequence would be repeated ten to fifteen times; each time Ricky would increase the tempo slightly until the class was moving at break-neck speed. After ten minutes of warm-up, it was time for routines.

"Give me something slinky, Ricky."

Puckering his lips and rolling his eyes for the mothers, who would titter, Ricky muttered, "I'll give him a slinky," while his fingers bumped and ground "St. Louis Blues."

After pondering the tune for a moment, Jay tapped out the first few bars. "Everybody get that?" He looked at our expressions. "No? Watch me again. Ricky." Jay repeated the first few bars' worth of steps. "Okay? Try it," he said, reaching to the piano top for his tobacco pouch.

Ricky gave us the intro, and we tried to copy what we had seen. Our ability to copy related to how similar the new steps were to those previously learned. Jay always moved the difficulty up at least a notch and often several notches. We repeated the new steps until the whole class could execute them. Then Jay added the next steps. We learned those and then repeated the whole routine to that point. This process repeated itself

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through that hour and subsequent hours until all the steps for that routine were taught. Then Jay made us spend several weeks polishing weak spots. When he was almost satisfied with our "slinky" routine, Jay turned to Ricky and said, "Something classical."

Rolling his eyes and puckering, Ricky muttered, "You're the 'classic,'" as his fingers presented "The Poet and Peasant Overture."

The class learned one or two more routines that year, maybe a soft-shoe set to "Once in Love with Amy" or a military to "Anchors Aweigh." Jay might decide to go contemporary—a cowboy twist with the class partnered-up—or baroque—a cantata with eclectic line changes. Whatever format, the routines became so increasingly complex that the fifth-year routines required greater skill than those in the musicals rerunning on television at the time.

Reaching this level also made me even more appreciative of how good a tap dancer Jay was. Watching old movies, I fantasized my tap technique better than Gene Kelly's and Fred Astaire's. (Anyone who can tap dance can tell they weren't creating all their sounds.) And I could envision myself becoming better than Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in the shorts I had seen and better than Sammy Davis, Jr. when the Will Masterson Trio was functioning. But Jay was the best. Somehow as I became better, his skill level seemed to increase so that the distance between his proficiency and mine stayed insurmountable. Aged sixty and half a foot shorter than I, he could leap two feet higher.

Any step I could do, he could do more effortlessly, more gracefully, more intricately, and faster. No matter how difficult the step, Jay could make it more difficult. Tap, being rhythm, can be made more difficult by adding more beats to the measure; therefore, by adding a beat, he could make a time step go from single to double, double to triple, triple to double-triple, double-triple to double-triple with syncopation. Moreover, when his taps struck the floor, the sound he produced was the clearest. His taps made contact just long enough to make only the sound he wanted. Never the slightest preparatory scrape nor the most minute departing blur. He was incapable of misstep.

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The Monday night advanced classes used to demonstrate their routines for the semi-annual Tap Dance Teachers' Association Meeting. The meeting was convened mostly for the membership to learn a new routine from Jay. Afterwards we laughed to one another about the teachers for whom we had demonstrated. Many had trouble executing moves every second-year student at Jay's could do.

Jay's show-biz background also brought in other show-biz folk one of whom was Miss Cuyjet, who taught what was becoming known as modern dance. Even though I was in the midst of black people all the time, it was my first exposure to anything "African." Miss Cuyjet, who could have doubled for Eartha Kitt, was the first person I knew to expand on the jungle beat I heard in the streets. Miss Cuyjet never spoke with her voice in class. When she wanted to correct, she shook the proper step at the incorrect student until the problem was corrected. If everyone was correct, she'd prance up and down the aisles and innovate with the individual students. She was the future of choreography; Jay was its past. I had misperceived.

My impression of what was happening in show business at the time was gained from thirties and forties musicals on television and Jay's studio atmosphere that mirrored the Broadway of those years. It was the end of the fifties. I should have seen that the straight tap style of the thirties and forties had spent the fifties dying out. By the sixties there would be no work for tap dancers. Even worse, I had missed the significance of Jay's continual enrollment decline. By the time I was fifteen Jay's class size had shrunk until his classes became no more than small group lessons.

I had devoted myself to something that had no future. Miss Cuyjet could have converted that childish energy into a marketable skill. But as it was, no one made me a promise of future employment. Jay's wasn't a trade school, even though that was the fantasy which propelled my interest.

Being a kid I didn't have a sense of history and didn't know about change. The only change I had experienced up to then was in myself: I was changing so fast that the world appeared to be staying the same. I didn't know that one of the church structures once had belonged to a different affiliation. I hadn't been alive when a travel agency occupied the space that was the

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hearing aid store. The jewelry store did actually sell stones: but who was to say if those stones were appraised fairly? The Combat Zone bars sold drinks but they weren't really bars. And what about the detective on the second floor? Could he be trusted?

Ike was president, and you could walk down any street at night time. In a few more years the Main Line ladies would be too afraid to come downtown to Blum's. Since the postwar boom was still on, the stores didn't turn over during the years I was learning my lessons. "For Rent" signs didn't become pervasive until I turned twenty. By that time the Dance Teacher to the Stars, like the antiquarian bookseller, had retired.

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MICHAEL VAN WALLEGHEN

The Awards Banquet

1. What Kind of Poetry Do You Write?

The university was thriving—
one of the best in the world
and getting better . . .

Absolutely the place to be
if you were interested at all
in super-conductivity
electro-magnetic imaging
or bio-degradable plastics . . .

And who wasn't after all?

We were just sitting down to eat
reading each other's name tags
introducing ourselves . . . Then

by way of breaking the ice
an international genius
in high-speed computing
takes notice of the poet:

Well, so you're the poet . . .

As if I were painted blue
and wore a bone in my nose.

Next he wants to know
what kind of poetry I write—

because of course he's guessed

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there must be different kinds
just as there are different kinds
of astronomy or physics . . .

When I say I write free verse
and rely for the most part
on my own experience

the whole table gets suddenly
busy with their salads.

They understand perfectly.
They wouldn't read that stuff
at gunpoint. Why should they?

They're too busy prying apart
the atom, splicing genes
planning trips to Mars
Jupiter, Alpha Centauri . . .

Besides that
no one writes in meter
and nothing rhymes anymore.

2. Squash Soup

Halfway through the squash soup
there's a disturbance . . . shouts

a loud clattering of dishes
from the chancellor's table . . .

then two campus policemen
dragging someone to the door.

The "lunatic" it turns out.
The guy in the baseball cap

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who almost ruined everything—
the robotics seminar, the talk

on artificial intelligence . . .
even the poetry reading:

an hallucination almost—
there, in the front row

tight-lipped, spit whitening
the corners of his mouth

his eyes too antic-bright
his whole aspect jittery

with manic calculation . . .
until he's finally up

and shouting *Liar! Filth!*
followed by certain verses

from the bible. God knows
what he's told the chancellor

fussing dimly with his tie . . .
A little squash soup perhaps.

Nothing really. Not blood.
Not a bullet hole at least.

And now he's even smiling.
A lunatic for Christ's sake.

What's the world coming to?
my neighbor wants to know

winking at the lovely chemist.
Tell us. You're the poet.

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Meanwhile, at another table
Prometheus whispers something

to the inventor of the wheel—
then draws it on a napkin.

3. Speech

After dessert, it's time
for the great hall to fall silent
and face the dais.

Now the chancellor
and the vice chancellor
shall deliver their odes.

And at the sound of the ox horn
let the heroes approach
and bear off their trophies . . .

Everyone but the poet that is
who keeps falling asleep, then
snorting suddenly awake again

like one of those clever
little birds on springs
that attach to drinking glasses—

a gift, something his father
of whom he now fitfully dreams
as a matter of fact

has just brought him home
from the bar. It's winter
and there's frost on the windows.

It's after supper; a sudden

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clattering of dishes, shouts . . .
and through it all the bird

bobs down and drinks over
and over from the still water
of the white kitchen table

miraculous as human speech—
a baby saying *Bird! Bird!*
there, in the black window.

In the Chariot Drawn by Dragons

Such a chariot has Helios, my father's father,
Given me to defend me from my enemies.
—Euripides, *Medea*

Fascinating the way our dreams
accommodate the muddled here

and now—the phone we answer
in our sleep for instance
before it startles us awake

or just this morning, the cat
killing something in the yard—

a baby rabbit it turns out
squealing that one high note
only nightmares comprehend . . .

the one where real children
lie dismembered in their beds—

as, indeed, I heard it spoken
on the evening news . . . Medea
of course, was never mentioned

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although I understood at once
the way we often do in dreams

that it was she again—disguised
in this last, horrific incarnation
to look like almost anyone . . .

a forgotten second cousin say
whose husband studied neutron

stars, black holes . . . matters
so quantum mechanically intense
so distant, it would take her

nearly fifteen billion years
of living practically abandoned

in married student housing
with two frenetic, infant sons
and no help at all from anyone

before she understood at last
that everything was hopeless—

that nothing, not even light
not the merest glimmer of it
could ever escape such gravity—

a force so crushing in the end
she could barely lift the knife

and wake us up again, heart
pounding, to some poor rabbit
screaming as the sun comes up

or Medea in her bloody bathrobe
and the chariot drawn by dragons.

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JAMES W. TUTTLETON

The Problematic Texts of Richard Wright

It is an event of great cultural importance to have, at last, the best of Richard Wright in The Library of America series.[1] Thus far, with respect to black writers, only W.E.B. DuBois has been represented, although it is only fair to the Library to remark that the best black writers are modern, and considerations of copyright and high royalty fees have delayed the appearance of many twentieth-century writers—both white and black.

In a manner of speaking, the reprint of a writer's work in The Library of America may be perceived as a sign of greatness, even an admission to the "canon of classic texts." At the very least it is a great honor, for most readers probably assent to the project's claim of offering "the only definitive collection of America's greatest writers." *Definitive* is a loaded word, about which I shall say more, but whatever his flaws, Richard Wright belongs, in my judgment, in this distinguished group—which includes, at least in the Library series, such familiars as Twain, Crane, Parkman, William and Henry James, Lincoln, Cather, Wharton, Cooper, and Franklin, among others. *Native Son* is Wright's best novel; but *Uncle Tom's Children* and his autobiography *Black Boy* are also compelling narratives that served to revolutionize black writing in America. Irving Howe, in "Black Boys and Native Sons," has even gone so far as to say that "the day *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever." And so, in a sense it was. A new work of great imaginative power rearranged the tradition of American fiction; and,

[1] The set is in two volumes: RICHARD WRIGHT: EARLY WORKS. The Library of America. $35.00, includes *Lawd Today!*, *Uncle Tom's Children*, and *Native Son*. RICHARD WRIGHT: LATER WORKS. The Library of America. $35.00, includes *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) and *The Outsider*. Arnold Rampersad, author of the acclaimed biography *The Life of Langston Hughes*, wrote the notes for both volumes and oversaw (I presume) the text selection.

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with respect to black writing, it made previous novels by black writers like Charles Chestnutt, DuBois, Nella Larsen, and Rudolph Fisher seem mild by comparison. Younger black writers also found a new model for the naturalistic representation of their experience; and in quick order other grim portraits of black life appeared in Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Curtis Lucas' *Third Ward Newark* (1946), and Willard Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947). Equally as important, after *Native Son*, white readers no longer found it possible to luxuriate in an illusion of black docility, passivity, and contentment.

Richard Wright, the grandchild of slaves and the child of an illiterate sharecropper and a backcountry schoolteacher, was born in 1908 on Rucker's Plantation near Roxie, Mississippi. He had all the disadvantages of being black in the Jim Crow Mississippi of that time; and the bitter effects of racial animosity toward blacks and legal segregation were compounded by a grinding poverty that would have stunted nearly anyone's development. Making ends meet required the family frequently to split up, and Richard and his brother were placed for a while with their grandparents in Natchez while the parents searched for work. Eventually his father, a brutal man, abandoned the family, and his mother moved the boys about continually—to Memphis, Tennessee, Jackson, Mississippi, and Elaine and West Helena, Arkansas—as she shifted from job to job, laboring as a cook or cleaning woman for white families. There was never enough money for rent or food. A dominant motif of Wright's autobiography is in fact the constant hunger he suffered. Again, for a time, Wright was placed in a Methodist orphanage in Memphis; and for a while he lived with his uncle Silas Hoskins. (Hoskins was lynched in 1917 in Elaine—only because, it seems, he had a successful business coveted by whites.)

It would be tedious to rehearse the family's many moves, or Wright's chronic hunger as a child, his makeshift schooling in one town or another, or the menial labor and odd jobs—as delivery boy, salesclerk, dishwasher, and bellboy—by which the growing boy tried to help out his mother and grandmother, who were in continual ill health. For them the strict fundamentalism of Methodist and Seventh-day Adventist Christianity was

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completely sustaining, but the religious prohibitions of his family, their moral strictness, and the manifest hypocrisy of Southern racial relations alienated and estranged the boy, even while he was filled with a lifelong sense of anxiety and dread. Great curiosity and omnivorous reading—in thrown-away issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, and *American Mercury*—saved him from the common fate. Mencken's iconoclastic *Prejudices* and *A Book of Prefaces* taught him to see "words as weapons"; he began to haunt the public libraries and to cultivate a burning ambition to write.

Black poverty in the rural South is horrific enough in Wright's account of it in *Black Boy*. The North, with its more liberal racial attitudes and industrial capacity beckoned to the Wrights, as it did to thousands of rural blacks. But the Wrights' move to Chicago in 1927 plunged young Richard into evils almost as great. And the urban poverty he experienced, particularly after the Crash of 1929, was equally as appalling. But he eked out a life of sorts, supporting his mother and aunt as a dishwasher, ditch digger, postal clerk, and insurance agent. He read extensively in Conrad, Twain, James, Proust, Dostoevsky, and others. But, as he told an interviewer for *L'Express* in 1960, "Theodore Dreiser first revealed to me the nature of American life, and for that service, I place him at the pinnacle of American literature."

The Communist organizers in the League of Struggle for Negro Rights captured Wright's attention in the 1930s, and he quickly became an ardent member of the local John Reed Club. Joining the Communist Party in 1934, he developed friendships with many proletarian writers and social critics—including Nelson Algren, Jack Conroy, Arna Bontemps, and James T. Farrell. His literary talent opened opportunities for him in *Left Front*, *Anvil*, and *New Masses*, and between 1934 and 1937, Wright was an impassioned activist at writers' congresses and in Midwest literary groups. Wherever he went he argued for racial equality and espoused his Communist faith. Yet he cooled to the Chicago branch of the Party in 1937 when it tried to infringe on his freedom as a writer. Moving in that year to New York, he pursued his literary career as the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker*, to which he contributed more than 200 articles. His first breakthrough came with the publication of

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Uncle Tom's Children in 1938. *Native Son*, a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, followed in 1940, and, with the many accolades it earned him, his career took off.

Wright's subsequent life seemed foreordained by his popular success in America. His works were translated into French, Italian, German, Dutch, and other languages. The power of the novel made him in constant demand as a spokesman for racial equality, and he toured the country as a platform speaker and panelist. His distinction as a portrayer of black life in America led naturally in 1941 to *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the Untied States*; and, after some disagreements over its content, his best-selling autobiography *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* appeared in 1945.

Although he had quietly broken with the Communist Party in 1942, his political views brought him under FBI surveillance, which continued throughout most of his lifetime, and he had constant passport difficulties in travelling abroad. In 1946, he took a month-long trip to France, at the invitation of Jean-Paul Sartre and Claude Lévi-Strauss, where he formed friendships with Gertrude Stein, Simone de Beauvoir, André Gide, and many others. In Paris he was introduced to the *Négritude* movement sponsored by Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. What particularly pleased him about France was its greater racial tolerance and openness to new ideas. In 1947, racial prejudice in the Greenwich Village housing market provoked his ire, and he decided to move permanently to France, taking with him his wife Ellen and daughter Julia. In Paris he became a spokesman for the American colony of blacks (and for African blacks in Paris), and he founded and joined many literary and liberal political organizations. The Existentialism of Sartre and Camus was then all the rage, and Wright began to read in the philosophy of Heidegger, Husserl, and Jaspers. This Existentialism, in ill-digested clumps, unfortunately mars his novel *The Outsider* (1953).

At the same time, his friendship with George Padmore, the Trinidadian author of *Pan-Africanism or Communism?*, heightened his interest in Africa, and in 1953 he toured Ghana, Sierra Leone and other countries—producing in 1954, out of this experience, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos*. As fascinated as he was by black Africa, it must be said that his

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reactions are those of a Western intellectual. During this period Wright's political and cultural interests interfered, in my view, with his imaginative work. *Savage Holiday* (1954), a novel about a white psychopathic murderer, was a weak performance. Harper rejected it, and he was obliged to bring it out as an original paperback by Avon. Somewhat like the later Faulkner, Wright saw himself as an important public spokesman on national and international issues. As a cultural reporter for the Congress of Cultural Freedom, he attended the Bandung (Indonesia) Conference of non-aligned nations and listened to Nehru, Sukarno, Sihanouk, Nasser, and others declaim on the state of international relations in the Cold War Era. *The Color Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* appeared in 1956. *Pagan Spain* (1957), a travel book, *White Man, Listen!* (1957), a collection of essays based on his lectures about race, and *The Long Dream* (1958), a novel set in Mississippi, represent the final phase of his declining career. He was in ill health in the last years of his life, probably as a result of amoebic dysentery picked up in Africa, but he died in fact of a heart attack in Paris in 1960, as he was completing the proofs of *Eight Men* (1961), his last collection of stories.

Richard Wright: Early Works begins with *Lawd, Today!*, a work not very well known—principally because it was not published in Wright's lifetime. Completed in 1935 and originally entitled *Cesspool*, the novel was rejected by several publishers. An account of one day—an anniversary of Lincoln's birthday—in the life of a black postal worker, it portrays in Jake Jackson an arrogant, irresponsible, vain and cruel man who begins the day by beating up his wife (the section is called "Commonplace"); he ends it, in a drunken rage, by nearly killing her (in "Rats' Alley"). In between, Jake is shown hanging out at Doc Higgins' Tonsorial Palace, overborrowing from a loan shark, malingering at the Post Office (the "Squirrel Cage" section), and drinking himself into a violent rage at a ghetto whorehouse, where he is rolled of the $100 he has just borrowed. No publisher would take the novel in 1936, and it languished in manuscript until it posthumously appeared in 1963. Professor Rampersad has thought it important enough to include here; and indeed, its structural form, rhythmic dialogue, contrapuntal themes, and suggestive symbolism give a clear foreshadowing of the

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Wright who would emerge, fully matured, in *Native Son.* As a reflection of the social and moral inferno in which these hollow men live, *Lawd, Today!* is Wright's version of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, construed as the bitter end of Lincoln's dream of black emancipation.

Uncle Tom's Children, a fully achieved work of fiction, contains five long stories, preceded by an autobiographical sketch, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow." Wright was a dedicated Communist at the time he wrote these tales, and each introduces, more or less, the Marxist viewpoint. But they are by no means mere propaganda, which is no doubt why Wright got into trouble with the Chicago branch of the Party, which hinted, ominously, of purging the "bastard intellectuals" in their midst. (His troubles with Party orthodoxy are recounted in his essay "I Tried to Be a Communist" [1944], which was reprinted in *The God That Failed.*) Each of these stories focuses on a black protagonist who reacts against brutalization by whites not so much on the basis of ideology as on an instinctive desire for freedom from social oppression and on the intuition of a better way of life. As the children of Uncle Tom, each of them has learned "to lie, to steal, to dissemble," to "play that dual role which every Negro must play if he wants to eat and live."

"Fire and Cloud" is, in my view, the best of the five. It tells the Depression story of a black minister, the Rev. Taylor, whose people are starving but who cannot persuade the white power structure to provide relief in the form of food. When the Communist organizers urge a demonstration, the Mayor and Police Chief urge Rev. Taylor to discourage his people from attending. He is a Christian, has always been a "good nigger," and is necessarily worried that if he leads his people into the town square, a bloodbath will await them. But before he can decide what to do, he is seized by Klan rednecks, taken out into the countryside, and horsewhipped until he is unconscious. On the following morning, having had a "vision," he walks with most of the town's 10,000 blacks into the square—a multitude so numerous that the Mayor and the police back down, capitulate, and agree to provide food for the starving. While the story is meant to be an illustration of Lenin's saying—that "*Freedom belongs to the strong!*"—its literary power inheres in Wright's masterly presentation of the poignant helplessness of

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those who have nowhere else to turn. All of the tales suggest a complex grasp of racist social relations in the pre-World War II South, yet Wright's command of the nuances of emotion in his inarticulate characters, their blind impulses and bewildered striving, is equally compelling. His ear was true to the dialect of Mississippi blacks, at least as I knew it forty years ago, and his expert use of biblical symbolism and Christian allusion is richly counterpointed with his own idiosyncratic Marxist perspective.

In the writing of *Uncle Tom's Children*, Wright was later to claim that he had

> made an awfully naïve mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest.

The response of reader sympathy for his characters meant less to Wright than administering a shock that would stun readers into an amelioration of the conditions of black existence. In *Native Son*, he exploded a bomb.

This narrative of a deprived black boy living in a rat-infested tenement who commits two more or less unintended murders naturalizes Dostoevsky and Dreiser in a Chicago tenement setting. Bigger Thomas becomes the chauffeur for a rich white man and is sexually attracted to his promiscuous daughter. After a night on the town, when Mary Dalton and her Communist boyfriend Jan Erlone get drunk and make love in the back seat of the car, Bigger Thomas has to put the comatose Mary to bed. In trying to keep her quiet, he accidentally smothers her, and, to cover up his crime, stuffs her body into the furnace. Framing the boyfriend, Bigger then fakes a kidnap note to mislead the police, but—when he is discovered—he runs. During the manhunt, he hides out in several abandoned buildings, murders his girlfriend, but is nevertheless caught and brought to trial. Modelling his narrative on *An American Tragedy*, Wright constructed the novel so as to rationalize the meaning of Bigger's experience through the speeches presented by the defense lawyer, a Communist named Boris A. Max. Needless to say, the sociological conditions of black urban

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poverty and white racism are invoked as the proximate cause of the murder of these two women. Thus white society is put on trial and Bigger Thomas is made out, at least implicitly, to be the victim of the social forces conspiring to diminish black life in America. But setting aside this unconvincing defense, the novel is still a work of horrifying and sobering import.

Wright was later to say, in "How Bigger Was Born" (reprinted here) that while his "contact with the labor movement and its ideology" (his euphemism for Communism) made him feel "the pinch and pressure of the environment" that produces a Bigger Thomas, he did not mean to say that "environment *makes* consciousness." But Bigger has too little self-consciousness to have any comprehensible view of why he is a murderer. Like Dreiser, Wright constructed his novel out of newspaper accounts of the trial of one Robert Nixon, who had murdered a white woman. Nixon was defended by two black lawyers. In the novel, Wright changes the defense to a Leftist white lawyer, for no black attorney would have mounted the sociological defense of Bigger that Max provides. Wright's attention to Bigger's shapeless inner life and the prolixity and dubiety of Max's courtroom speechifying have led some of Wright's defenders to transform the book into a psychological novel, of sorts, so as to deflect attention from its social message. Yet this maneuver robs the novel of its force as a document of social protest and misrepresents Wright's ideological sympathies in the late thirties.

In understanding Wright's development into a Communist, his autobiography is immensely illuminating, for its portrait of abject poverty and of racial prejudice in the South produced in him such smoldering rage that not even the ministrations of family or the consolations of religion could be adequate. In 1943, when he completed the manuscript, he intended to call his autobiography *American Hunger*. In the draft he sent to his agent Paul Reynolds, the manuscript contained two sections: "Southern Night," dealing with his life in the South; and "The Horror and the Glory," dealing with his Chicago life and membership in the Party. The Book-of-the-Month Club was interested in it, but they recommended to Wright's editor at Harper, Edward Aswell, that only the first part be published. Wright agreed and renamed the autobiography *Black Boy*; it

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dealt with only his Southern years. Not until 1977 was the second part published by Harper and Row—under the title *American Hunger*. In the Library of America text, we now have the whole of Wright's original manuscript—presented under the title *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*).

As rich as is the content of Wright's autobiography (not to speak of *The Outsider*), some of the textual decisions by the Library of America deserve comment. As a first principle of professional editing, it ought to be the objective *to present that form of the text that represents the author's final intention.* According to this principle, then, a text editor should incorporate any changes on the manuscript, galleys, page proofs (and pages of already published editions) that reflect the last wish of the author with respect to the form in which his work should appear. *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*), in the Library of America edition, is not a form of the text of his autobiography that Wright ever approved. An argument can be made that Wright merely acquiesced, under pressure from Harper and the book club, in a change that otherwise he would not have made. And in fact Wright privately complained in his journal that "pressure from Communists" had induced the club to request deletion of the second part. (I have seen no evidence for this belief.) Yet in after years, when he had attained international fame, Wright never moved to reissue his autobiography in the form in which he had originally written it. The second part—already mined for mazagine articles—only appeared posthumously, in 1977, as a separate text, with the approval of Mrs. Ellen Wright, who controls the literary estate.

These textual considerations also raise a question about the form of *Native Son* as well. Professor Rampersad remarks in a note that "This text of *Native Son* is the last version of the text that Wright prepared without external intervention, and in all the other cases these texts are the last, or last-known, versions that Wright approved." His reference to external intervention deserves clarification. When Aswell sent a copy of the Harper proofs to the Book-of-the-Month Club, Dorothy Canfield Fisher (and perhaps other judges of the Club) objected to a passage, early in the novel, where Bigger and a friend masturbate in a movie theater, while watching a newsreel clip about Mary Dalton as a rich Chicago socialite and left-wing sympa-

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thizer. The Club was inclined to accept the novel if that passage were deleted. Wright then agreed to excisions deemed to be obscene. In the Library of America text, these excisions have been restored as instances of unwarranted external interference. But Wright approved the deletion, rewrote the scene, and modified later particulars (not always with perfect consistency) to harmonize with his changes. Do not these changes represent his final intention? Moreover, in later years, to my knowledge, Wright never complained of the editorial suggestions supplied by Aswell or the Club. And he never moved to reissue the novel in its manuscript form.

In reaction to the Library's editorial decisions, James Campbell, in "The Wright Version," has raised a question—in the *Times Literary Supplement* for 13 December 1991—about whether Wright "would have approved the work of re-editing which has been carried out on his two most famous books." Rampersad, in his view, "appears to have overstepped his brief." Rampersad has not, to my knowledge, replied to this accusation. But Mark Richardson, who describes himself as having assisted in the research for the Library edition, replied in the *TLS* for 24 January 1992 that the Library's decisions were sound because "Wright would not have revised the two books if the Book Club hadn't asked him to. . . ." Likewise, Ellen and Julia Wright, the novelist's widow and daughter, announced rather grandly in a *TLS* letter of 31 January that

> It is important to us that Bigger Thomas, who was "castrated" because deprived of his sexual life in the edited 1940 text, is made whole again—and made human—by the reinstatement of the masturbation scene at the beginning of *Native Son* and of references to his guilt-ridden desire for rich, white Mary prior to the panic which leads him to smother her accidentally. Likewise it is important to have reinstated *American Hunger* as an integral part of *Black Boy* because of the psychological importance of viewing Wright's account of his disillusionment with Communist Party politics as only one in a series of betrayals, the first of which takes place in *Black Boy* when young Richard is disowned by his father over the kitten episode.

There is no question that readers will want to know about these variant versions. The question, in relation to serious bibliographical and editorial practice, is where these variants

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belong—in a restored text or in footnotes? The fact is that Rampersad's restored passages are, in the lingo of professional text editors, *rejected substantives.* Wright agreed to reject them and did so. His reasons are not fully clear. He may have assented because he knew that Club sponsorship would vastly increase the book's sales. But he may just as well have felt that he did not wish to be judged an obscene writer. Just as possible, he might, on reconsideration, have concluded that the aesthetic merit of his text suffered from the scene in which Bigger masturbates. We really cannot know.

What we do know is that he agreed to make changes, did make them, and never afterward—to my knowledge—complained that he had been coerced by his publishers. We need to have these restored passages—but they belong in the notes, not in the text. When later editors, on their own authority, undertake to restore cancelled material, they do not honor the author's final intention and do not produce "definitive texts." While we now live in a more liberal age, where almost any obscenity can be claimed to have aesthetic merit or socially redeeming value, the imposition on a text of an editor's modern attitudes really serves to create a different book from the one the author finally intended, a book different from the one that made its impact on the reading public of his time.

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PEYTON HOUSTON

Images of the Garden

It was the opening
of our finding and the room
as we entered, opened up for us and the high windows
gave us the light of that day, the garden outside and all.
As we saw it, it was beautiful
but should we not have, I thought, long ago
been outside there, in that air,
among the flowers and feeling the waterdrops
of those high-flung fountains? However, we were not
and in that room could as yet
find no way to the outside, no door
and as we found, no window,
that we could open
all being locked or fixed shut. Now the bibelots and
    treasurable items
about us, the costly ormolu, the figures
of bronze or gilt or ivory, the carpets so full of color
and themselves a kind of garden,
palled and we found ourselves wanting
what was real though, we thought, impossible,
and what we could know about and experience
only through windows, with those paths
among the greenery and blossoms
not allowed to us. But I realized also
that at least I could see them through the window.
This was comforting.

And now already my hand on your sleeve
was growing into a flower
and the green vine of my thought
was beginning to be laden with fruit
which was ripening as I watched. You turned to me

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and your glance as I looked into it showed me
how supremely you were there
behind the transparency of your eyes.
Now I knew
this was the opening I had been looking for. How happily I
ran out
into the air and among those blossoms
like a child just discovering things. You were there to greet
me:
now we were walking together in the fresh quietness.

Importance of the Unicorn

I

So very particularly that
arrival at the peculiar
destination: this, we realized, was
what we had been attempting to invent time
for.

To announce to oneself the
new and explicit freedom: there to
love without intent of gain, to
be in a milieu, habitat, world, universe
merely a point of force, of
reference, of possibility with
respect to a kind of
discovery . . .

I look at you and your smile
absolutely undoes me into
putting myself into the
lifting of the entire
situation into angels. I hear
all sorts of drums, citherns, other

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musical instruments and find
myself dancing to them. This is
with you, of course.

. . . Now the birds are flying above
us and their shadows flickering over the
world tell me to look up. They are
straining into climbing. It is the pure tension of
God.

II

How uniquely and adeptly and
so often unexpectedly you come to
me walking over the waters of sleep carrying
in your hands the prodigious item. You
give it to me: I cannot hold it.

It is so heavy, so packed into itself, so
enormously dense. Not even if they put half of the earth's
mass into a sphere the size of a
basketball would it be so impossible to hang
onto. And you tell me that it is my task to hold it.

Not one fraction of a nanosecond can my
strength withstand tug of that from my hands. It
penetrates the floor, the building, the rock of the
mantle, the core. There in the immense iron it
comes to rest as it can go no further.

And you expect me to understand everything going
on in the universe and myself when I cannot even
come to terms with who you are and what you
carry to me? Now you tell me it is the history of one
sparrow's fall, one sparrow by itself, but together with
all that is involved with it.

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III

The beginning is always beginning, the ending always
ending. However, we know that both are to be
classified with the other
mythological animals.

God, as previously, still walks in the seamless: it is
we who insist on divisions. But infinity divided by infinity
remains infinity.

Looking into the major areas of accomplishment it becomes
quite evident that the mythological animals have a
usefulness and application not too well understood. Such as
how to operate a world.

So that by them the idea can examine itself, meaning look
into its meaning, the possibility be exemplified . . .

When the unicorn came into view walking slowly over the
meadow I was overcome
by his marvellous whiteness, his ease, his happiness among
all those new flowers that had sprung up out of the grass.

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MARK PERLBERG

The Color of the Spirit

The cranes fly across the grey-green bowl,
three cranes with stick legs stretched out behind them,
wearing red crowns. They fly above the crackle
of the glaze, twists of clouds.
It would be too simple to say the bowl is the color
of jade, as the old Chinese poets often put it:
Though we are cleft by exile, my love,
we gaze tonight at the same jade moon.
Rather, it is a pond widening into a lake
opening to a river still brushed by mist.
It is a little sea in my hands. Serene.

The Last News from *Voyager*

When the craft was about to fling beyond
the tidal haul of the nine planets
and fall toward the hives of stars,
they turned the cameras around
and took a few snapshots of home:
A blue drop shining. A tear.

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JEFFREY FRANKLIN

Florida

As the sun goes down
on the sput-sput of lawn sprinklers
in St. Pete, the long shush
and dull clink of shuffleboard ceases.

The mammoth white-stucco hotels
begin to glow in the dusk
with a kind of vacant dignity.
I can feel foundations settling

those critical inches toward sea level,
windowsills crumbling, moist
and soft as angel-food cake.
Ah, the insidious leisure of decay!

I'm driving a rented car
down palm-lined boulevards.
The traffic signals bob with wind
off the bay, their Christmas colors sad

and directing no one, surely
not me. After blocks of derelict sidewalk,
faded life-vests dangling askew
in murky storefronts,

I pull to a light beside
the Arthur Murray School of Dance,
the whole corner a wedge of light
sealed in plate glass.

The floor sways with grey-haired couples
holding each other with ease

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and affection, turning in sure slowness
to a music I can't hear.

Suspended among lurking
and disinterested facades,
they drift in an other-worldly glow.
The light goes green.

Ahead, the road extends
into the wavering salt flat of the bay.
The palms, stooped ancestral gods,
gently clack their manes and nod.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Both Doors Open

> We come a long long distance and we're never goin' back
> Got my eyes wide open
>
> I got both doors open . . .
> I got the back door open
> I got the screen door open.
>
> —David Byrne, "Big Blue Plymouth" from the Golden Section of Twyla Tharp's *The Catherine Wheel*, 1981

TWYLA THARP'S NEW YORK SEASON was a wonderful apparition, something that couldn't be accounted for in the normal scheme of things, like a meteor or the northern lights. When the two weeks were over, I had trouble remembering that people still take *Swan Lake* or *Stars and Stripes* seriously. The mainstream press bestowed its usual condescending praise on Tharp, but the audience was way ahead of that. Tharp did better at the box office than any dance in a long time, thus helping out the financially pressed City Center organization, and the atmosphere in the theatre grew more euphoric each night. There's something special about these audiences. They're respectful, they pay attention. They know something about Tharp; they discuss the dances; they aren't in a rush to applaud every trick. In a time when most dance is a predictably entertaining commodity, they don't take anything for granted. In fact, I thought they even understood that they had a role as Tharp's collaborators, not merely her appreciative fans.

It would be easy to account for Tharp's success in terms of the way she interfaces with popular culture. The nine dances in the season's repertory had music by pop favorites Chuck Berry, Frank Sinatra, David Byrne and the Beach Boys, plus a collage of recorded hits so familiar they didn't need credits, for the new *Men's Piece*. And there were new synthetic/fusion scores incorporating African (*Grand Pas: Rhythm of the Saints* after Paul Simon) and Latino sounds (Bob Telson's music for the new *Sextet*). Every pop mode came with accompanying costumes, gestures, atmosphere, like the bubble-gum chewing in the Chuck Berry piece, *Ocean's Motion*, or the revolving crystal ball and the gorgeous dresses and tuxedos in *Nine Sinatra Songs*.

Tharp doesn't do this merely to push the buttons of mass taste. What she's looking for are ways to extend theatrical dancing by teasing it into vernacular idioms. Her dancers are as flexible and

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relaxed launching into a pirouette as they are slinking through a foxtrot. There's no sense of stop and restart in a Tharp dance, only a sense of momentum flowing through the body and streaming across the space. At the very least, this natural-looking body style can humanize ballet dancers, as in *Sextet* and the *Grand Pas*, both of which are framed in conventional ballet structures and steps. Easy shoulders and malleable torsos undermine the didacticism of the pressured step vocabulary. Personal gestures and tossed-away tricks make these superdancers seem more ordinary, less like gods.

Tharp herself is about as big a star as there is in dance, and she attracts the biggest: she made the new pas de deux for Paris Opera Ballet director Patrick Dupond and *étoile* Isabelle Guérin, in trade for the services of four of Dupond's dancers, and they danced it on opening night, traditionally a dressed-up glamour occasion. You can imagine the celebrated pair performing it in grandiose European opera houses for years to come. Although it serves its publicity-generating function, *Grand Pas* is actually about a kind of split personality, about stars as posturing virtuosity machines who are also real men and women. They—especially the witty, adorable Guérin—play the tricks for all they're worth, but there are puzzling moments in between the sections when they stare at the audience challengingly, and the audience, set to roar its approval, is stopped dead in its tracks. At the first performance there was almost no applause until the end, when the pent-up ovation was double-crossed again as the dancers squelched it with a choreographed encore. Another day (Guérin danced it with Paris Opera colleague Lionel Delanoe after Dupond left town) I happened to sit next to Tharp and *she* applauded loudly in one of the silent confrontations. I wasn't sure if Tharp had miscalculated, or if the performers went too far with what she intended, but the audience got a mixed message three times.

Tharp trips up occasionally because she takes risks. She escapes the canonizers because she's in constant evolution. She believes that fixed institutions are bad for her. She's scared of becoming stuck, ritualized, smug. And she's always asking us to burn our bridges along with her. Most acknowledged dance leaders are trying to hang on to the strategies that have worked for them before, and critics insist that they do. We want authentic-looking revivals and we want the best repertory preserved. In spite of pitiful public funding, we're willing to see the largest allocations go to the entrenched institutions that promise not to stray too far from the comfort of the old masters and thus reassure us that the past hasn't all been a write-off. It's not that Twyla Tharp disrespects the past; far from it. It's that she refuses to indulge in nostalgia. Her solutions are always one step ahead of us. Old Tharp loyalists this season sometimes were thrown by the new company. One told me, "*The Golden Section* has lost its style." Well, it now has a new style, and in that guise it looks almost like a new dance.

Tharp presents her own repertory not as a freeze-dried exercise

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but as something we must see with new eyes. The tokens of the past that lay buried in it can become a stratum of memory, happy or sad, that enriches the moment. To see long-time Tharp associate Sara Rudner, now in her late forties, strutting and shaking her shoulders among the gyrating boppers in the suite of dances made from *Deuce Coupe* not only recalls the dance as it used to be, but reminds us that dancers' lives and their stage power continue on after they're no longer young. But Tharp doesn't force us to give up the present in order to remember the past, and this earns her a lot with the audience. Newcomers don't sit there wondering what the fuss was all about, back then, because however redolent the dances may be of their past histories, they always offer contemporary pleasure as well.

As Tharp has now reconstituted her forces, past and present are woven together in the repertory and in the personnel. When she terminated her last company in 1989, she swore she wouldn't have another one. The present organization is a temporary package, with four dancers on loan from the Paris Opera Ballet, one from New York City Ballet, and one independent choreographer, Sara Rudner. The other twelve dancers include three NYCB defectees, three former Tharp company members plus ballet mistress Shelley Washington, and veterans of Broadway and the modern dance companies of Nina Wiener, José Limón, Lar Lubovitch and the Australian Dance Theatre.

Despite its clear bimorphism, Tharp's new ensemble was touted—or lamented—mainly as a ballet troupe. Critics almost universally spoke of the new Tharp as though she had abandoned her roots in modern dance entirely. This is nonsense. Not only is the company a conglomerate of ballet and modern dancers, Tharp makes no distinctions among them in status; she choreographs for what they can do, pushing each individual into the stratosphere of his or her present capacities. This eclectic mixing of talent is hardly a new thing for Tharp. Even if the 1973 Beach Boys ballet, *Deuce Coupe*, could be regarded as a polemic—it was originally choreographed as a pastiche of competing but eventually reconciled styles for the Joffrey Ballet with the Tharp company—she followed it immediately with a pointe piece for the Joffrey, *As Time Goes By*.

Yet despite a generation of trespassing and fraternization between ballet and modern dance, the arbiters of culture are still redrawing the line in the sand. This can be a convenient way to preserve the comfortable categories once ruled by Graham and Balanchine. Tharp, alive and creating, threatens these traditions. If she's trying to do ballet now, she obviously isn't *really* doing it, so she must be thumbing her nose at it—or doing a cheap imitation. The piece that probably got the least attention from the press at City Center was the most serene, sincere and classical, and least tricky: *The Little Ballet*, now beguilingly danced by Robert LaFosse, Stacy Caddell and a corps of three women.

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The fact is, for most of her career, Tharp has worked at rehabilitating dance styles and vocabularies, including those of classical ballet. Twenty years ago she discovered how to cloak her formal concerns in popular music and fashionable costumes, but there have always been stark, even dire exercises in abstraction, some of them very successful with the audience, like *The Fugue* and *In the Upper Room.* When I first saw the new *Octet* in Ohio I could appreciate its technical perfection and clarity. It seemed no more than absolute form, like a drafting assignment. But opening night in New York, as the piece swept to a conclusion, with the men spinning and jumping in place while the women threaded backwards past them in diagonal lines, the obsessive momentum suddenly cracked open and halted as the lights went out. Stricken, I could hardly wait to see the piece again. By the end of the season I'd begun to think the *Octet* is a masterpiece.

The ballet has four couples in black clothes, the women particularly striking in shorts and halter-like tops and pointe shoes. The driven and mechanical score, Edgar Meyer's "The Plumed Serpent," pits odd combinations of instruments, or electronics imitating instruments, against each other—guitar and xylophone, cello and organ. I didn't like it much, but, insidiously, it began to sound just right for the dance. From the beginning the dancers seem locked into squared-off structures and partnerships, like two men against four women, all the women alone. Though the units move identically together, they don't seem to communicate with each other except by some kind of erotic radar. They stretch and gesture off-center, preen and show off brilliantly. When the men partner the women it's almost always from behind, and they fit themselves together in strange shapes with lots of body contact but no eye contact.

All of a sudden the fast tempo is cut off and the music becomes mysterious and acidly dissonant. Robert LaFosse brings Shawn Stevens on, again partnering her from behind, and she "walks" with huge steps that hardly touch the ground, moving across the front of the stage but facing the audience. The other three couples retreat to one corner where, clustered together for the only time in the dance, they seem to paw the ground with flat feet, like nervous animals. The eerie mood dissolves and they take up the fast pace again, but something seems changed. As the men pound into the air the women begin bourréeing backwards, once again in a square formation, slicing back and forth through the men's square on two diagonals. With no warning the two contradictory squares break up and the couples reform. With one or two fast turns, they're suddenly facing one another, maybe for the first time, not touching, their arms behind their backs. You just have time to see this, and the lights go to black.

Is this a mating ritual? Did I say it's all hard-edged virtuosic ballet steps?

Sometimes it seems to me that Tharp is just as absorbed in the question of partnering, which is the ballet metaphor for relationships,

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as she is with movement vocabulary. Long before anyone was flinging around words like "gender" she flipped Gary Chryst over her back in *Deuce Coupe*. (Allison Brown does the step now with Michael Whaites, to the audience's delight.) And *The Golden Section* was all about a postrevolutionary Utopia where men lift men, teams of women lift men, teams of men lift women, and the dancing never stops for innuendo. Tharp has made more intimate duets, both sexual and nonsexual, than any choreographer I can think of, but she's still working at the theme. The new *Men's Piece* suggests that partnering is more than a dance problem to Tharp. Talking and dancing with five men, she asks herself, and the audience, whether it's possible any longer for a man and a woman to dance in each other's arms. And by inference, to work together or live together. What's the woman's role in this kind of partnership, and for that matter what's the man's?

Men's Piece is a sprawling, funny series of dance-skits in which Our Twyla struggles with work and play, dissatisfied with all the traditional definitions. As Choreographer, she bullies Jamie Bishton, Keith Young and Stephane Elizabe into a shapely backup chorus for some high-stepping number in which she'll, of course, be the star. As Female, she tries being Victim, Echo, Romantic, even Jock, to Kevin O'Day's all-purpose dance-collaborator and boyfriend. Finally she proposes a partnership of equals, an improvised duet with O'Day where they wrestle each other through a hilarious series of awkward moves, slithering from embrace to encumbrance. Even this ("love is a matter of constant maintenance") doesn't seem quite the answer, and as the lights go out she eyes her long-suffering stage manager, Brian Haynesworth, and wonders if she could teach *him* to dance.

One message of the *Men's Piece* is that Tharp, for all her virtuosic and structural resources, is still drawn to the earthy, the klutzy, the everyday ways that people do their dance. When the piece opens, she's draped over a portable barre at the back of the stage, in her baggy sweat pants, trying out pieces of music. She begins to dance to "Love is Here to Stay." On opening night, the audience held its breath. Twyla Tharp dancing is something entirely different from everything else, and perhaps, for the New York audience today, really unexpected—seemingly effortless, natural, close to the body, rhythmic, sensual without the slightest ornamentation. With typical Tharpian generosity, this little solo showed us not only Tharp herself, but the true roots of all her dance, from the most casual to the most exacting.

I think this grounding in life is why we can't ever call her a ballet choreographer, at least not in the elitist sense. All her work hovers between rigor, discipline, form and desire, lapse, chaos. In the elegant *Nine Sinatra Songs*, which has seven couples, the audience cheers most wildly for Jamie Bishton, late of the pre-Ballet Theater Tharp company, and Jodi Melnick, who continues to dance with downtown experimental groups. This last duet, a farcical comment on Sinatra's

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"That's Life," has always seemed on the cheap side to me, mainly because the woman has to be a dishrag in the hands of her loutish partner. But the other sections of the dance had also slid into caricature over the years, and the new cast re-humanized it remarkably. I especially enjoyed Keith Young's sensuality with Delphine Moussin ("Softly as I Leave You"), Stacy Caddell and Stephane Elizabe transforming the kewpie dolls of "Somethin' Stupid" into pre-adolescent sweethearts, and Shawn Stevens and Gordon White as suave and sexy lovers in "All the Way."

Because the company made it possible to look at *Nine Sinatra Songs* again, I noticed this time how Tharp has appropriated the dynamics of ice dancing to give her ballroom duets an extra expansiveness in space. The lifts are often built on a circling, swinging momentum, and much of the dancing has the partners linking arms or hands to form a fulcrum around which they wheel in dizzying arcs that skim the floor.

The Chuck Berry piece, *Ocean's Motion*, was choreographed in 1975 when Tharp had a very small company. By the spring of 1980 it had undergone its first metamorphosis, when, halfway through the piece, she brought on five dancers who exactly matched the original five in costume, and who performed a replica of their movement only reversed left to right. What had been a playful reflection of high school mores and rock'n'roll became material for a formal compositional structure. Now the second group is performed almost entirely by the "ballet" contingent and this work too looks new all over again.

I felt the most conventionally balletic new pieces of the season were the least interesting. The *Grand Pas* had its charms, mostly due to Guérin, but the *Sextet* felt regressive. I even thought one might have been a spin-off of the other. In addition to their fusion scores, they had similar costumes for the women (by Santo Loquasto), filmy dotted wrap dresses over peekaboo leotards. *Sextet* maintained that line-up-and-face-the-audience formation that tells us we're in for a display of virtuosity. Two subordinate couples always backed up the principal couple, Guérin and Robert LaFosse. The movement was fast, highly technical, and nonstop, like most of Tharp's pieces, and the women hadn't the slightest whiff of spunk to counter all the lifting and pushing around they had to endure from the men. Tharp certainly has found ways to equalize her men and women in other dances, so I could only assume the *Sextet* was a deliberate re-invention of a predictable style. There were clever distortions and gestures derived from the catchy sambas in the music, but it still looked like old ballet to me.

It took six months to train this new company. The dancers looked reborn every performance, and Tharp was able to create new repertory on them including at least one major work. After New York they toured Japan briefly. After that, no commitments were made. Last fall, as Tharp rehearsed at the Wexner Center at Ohio State

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University, she was contemplating her options: making a movie in Hollywood, setting repertory in Boston, Paris, Chicago, doing something for TV, for Broadway, touring, choreographing; but she was refusing to say how the new ensemble of dancers would fit into these projects. By late winter the grapevine was hinting at a hookup with Mikhail Baryshnikov and a stellar tour. Whose dancers and which repertory hadn't been revealed. In a way, I'm wary of seeing Tharp move into the blockbuster Star-and-Friends league. It's the dance world's equivalent of rock concerts. I don't know if great dance is possible when dancers living on a hazardous, hyped-up roller coaster of travel and ovations have to keep knocking out lightweight repertory at exorbitant ticket prices (Baryshnikov's White Oak Project was reportedly charging $250 a seat in Europe this winter) for a worldwide drop-in audience. But another of Twyla Tharp's talents is her ability to thrive on what other dancers consider adversity. She and the company seem convinced at the moment that the times call for extreme solutions.

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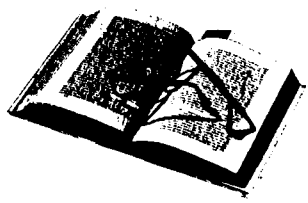
Clara Claiborne Park

REJOINING THE COMMON READER



Foreword by Howard Nemerov

This humane and entertaining volume extends Clara Claiborne Park's project of relating literature to the experience of its readers. Her concern is with "the common reader," the person who wants to know what "use" he or she can make of literature. The *Los Angeles Times Book Review* writes, "Essays on literary works by mainstream academics tend toward the soporific, but in this collection, Park makes literature seem relevant, even important. It's clear from the first essay that her sensibilities are different from those of most scholars."

Howard Nemerov hailed *Rejoining the Common Reader* as "a blessing, especially on teachers such as myself and on the common reader (such as myself)." This book is wise and absorbing reading both for academics who have grown to resent the intrusiveness of theory, and for general readers who long to recapture the pleasure of reading for personal enrichment.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Minor Masters, Neglected Giants

THE LAST HALF OF 1991 WAS A BOUNTIFUL TIME for Francophiles on the East Coast. "Pleasures of Paris: From Daumier to Picasso" made its way from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts to the IBM Gallery in New York, the long-awaited Seurat exhibition was held at the Metropolitan Museum, and a first-ever Félix Vallotton retrospective was presented at the Yale University Art Gallery. In all, an instructive immersion—more or less.

In the spacious galleries of I.M. Pei's wing of the Boston Museum, "Pleasures of Paris" was a good-looking show; less so, in the cramped halls of the IBM Building. In any case, its intention was crystal clear—to celebrate the French capital in its glory days of the fin de siècle—and the 200 paintings, drawings, posters, and photographs it brought together included the expected treasure trove, not only of French works from Manet to Picasso (fortunately we weren't Lautrec'd to death) but of American versions of Paris by Mary Cassatt, John Singer Sargent, and Alfred Maurer. (Separate sections of the show treated discrete aspects of Parisian life, e.g., boulevards, circuses, cafes, museums, the Bois de Boulogne.) To my surprise, what I liked about the exhibition I felt with equal force on both visits, but what was off-putting I felt only during my second experience of the show. The point: how difficult it is to think critically when offered such elegant, sumptuous fare.

The appeal for Americans in this kind of event, at this late date in the study of French cultural history and the roots of Modernism, has to be in the presentation of less familiar images and of artists who have been given short shrift in the standard textbooks. In that sense, there was plenty to relish in Boston: James Jacques Joseph Tissot (a realist who has often been regarded as less worthy of attention than the most second-rate Impressionist) looks more interesting, as a painter and a social chronicler, every time I see him, especially in his unapologetically stagey circus pictures, and Jean Beraud's precise street scenes are likewise more engaging than his obscure name would suggest. The revisionist scholarship of the last fifteen years that has asked us to rethink French realism, once buried by the avalanche of the avant-garde, makes more sense the more examples of Tissot & Co. we see. The discomfort I felt with this exhibition, though, came almost as an afterthought, with the sense of being manipulated once again by the engines of cultural mythology hard at work. Yes, this was a gracious time in its way; yes, these people knew how to create a climate Londoners and New Yorkers could never

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imagine (an estimated 30,000 cafes in Paris in 1895!), but we know now that that wasn't the whole story. Greed, corruption, and worse existed side by side with the pleasures and amenities, and in a certain sense allowed for them. It is especially hard to forget the torrent of images from "The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, and Justice," the Jewish Museum's 1988 exhibition that chillingly documented "urbane" French anti-Semitism in these years—not to mention the jingoism and smugness that turn-of-the-century Parisians so frequently manifested. In "Pleasures of Paris," there is a nod (by way of some Théophile Steinlen drawings) in the direction of this underside, this awareness that it wasn't all Feydeau farces and good times in the Tuileries, but fundamentally the order of the day remains, Let Us Now Praise The Golden Age.

In a similar spirit, the Georges Seurat retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum was designed to call forth the faithful for a century's end reminder about The Canon. Get the Big Names right, ladies and gentlemen, and know them for the right reasons. In Seurat's case, that means all those dots, lots and lots of them, and the original effects of light and form that Pointillism explored. The only trouble with this enterprise—aside from the fact that I have always suspected that only a few art-lovers truly believe that Seurat merits his place with Cézanne and Gauguin in the Post-Impressionist hierarchy, that most viewers are left quite cold by these stately paintings—was that the most famous Pointillist oils (owned by museums in Europe, Chicago, and the Barnes Foundation in Pennsylvania) were not available for loan. Almost inadvertently, then, the Met's exhibition threw us back on the small un-Pointillist oils and the drawings on thick paper in conté crayon. The Seurat who emerges from that slant isn't the much-touted, slightly boring precursor of twentieth-century structural experimentation but the last of the great nineteenth-century draughtsmen—and the breathtaking accomplishments that such drawing talent was put to are what made the exhibition worthwhile. Seurat's portrait of his friend Aman-Jean, for instance, all varying shades of black and charcoal with only the smallest patches of white paper showing through, is a study of one man's concentration and quiet creativity; it is also a demonstration of a perfectly modeled figure—facially suggestive in a way crayon can rarely be—and a hypnotic play of shadows.

Félix Vallotton (1865–1925) was another artist, Swiss-born but essentially French, who had an exceptional graphic skill that exceeded, in the main, the power of his oil-on-canvas works. The excellent retrospective at the Yale University Art Gallery (which traveled to Houston, is now in Indianapolis, and will be seen in Amsterdam and Lausanne in the fall) was the first complete Vallotton survey in the United States, and as such was something of an event. A quirky man, Vallotton eludes identification with any one Post-Impressionist camp, yet it was easy to see in this show why he has long been a favorite of twentieth-century painters. He could be comic in a kinky way, as in the woodcut *The Alarm* (1895), in which a group of swans goes after a female bather lifting up her bathing gown to

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expose her bottom; erotic, as in the woodcut entitled *Laziness* (1898) of a nude and her cat lounging in bed; pointedly political, as in the famous *The Age of Paper* (1898) that shows Parisians devouring the news of the Dreyfus scandal, or more psychologically critical, especially when dealing with male-female bonds. The married couple in the ink on paper drawing *At Home* (1898) sit at the breakfast table reading their morning papers while facing in opposite directions. Often, these moods will overlap: those nervy swans in *The Alarm* look pretty phallic in a picture that is as mean as it is funny.

Vallotton's portraits and nudes in oil, of which there were many in this exhibition, somehow don't measure up next to the expressive, dynamic woodcuts and drawings. It is hard to know why; they are competently done and often evoke a feeling of solitariness or anomie that should speak to us. But in quantity they simply look arid. For two paintings alone, though, Félix Vallotton deserves his secure place in art history. His *Félix Feneon at the Revue blanche* (1896) captures that intense, cultivated, indefatigable critic to the life, and *The Lie* (1898) from Baltimore's Cone Collection surpasses Edvard Munch as a study in symbolic color relationships (variations of blood red) and tortured social contracts. A well-dressed couple hug on a sofa, they whisper the words they know the other wants to hear, and we are left to wonder if the lined pattern behind them is only the stripes of the wallpaper or the bars of the prison of romantic convention.

For some years now, in my visits to New Haven every six months or so, I have been standing and marveling at a couple of very small oil paintings at the Yale Center for British Art executed by one Richard Parkes Bonington. And a peculiar experience that has always been. For these pictures—*A Fishmarket Near Boulogne, Near Quilleboeuf, Barges on a River,* all dated 1824 or 1825—are of remarkable quality; they hang in an end room (in this best designed of America's small museums, the work of architect Louis Kahn) just a few yards away from major works by Turner, Constable, and Hogarth. Yet who has ever heard of Bonington? Somehow, though, when the specifics of *Hadleigh Castle* or the exact composition of one of Yale's majestic Turners would grow dim in memory, there (I would discover, without fail) were Bonington's mottled, debris-strewn beaches, his shoreline mists and tiny masts, his afternoon light hitting rooftops and water, the particles of air themselves almost visible, fixed in my mind to the last detail.

At last, a complete exhibition of this artist's works confirms the suspicion that here is a name that belongs with the best, that the Yale pictures aren't some kind of fluke. Nor, the show in New Haven implied, should Bonington's story only be one of great promise cut off too soon. Though he died too young—his dates are 1802–1828—and from the evidence on view would eventually have been seen as an equal of Delacrioix and Constable, Bonington produced some formidable paintings in his twenty-six years, landmarks of nineteenth-

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century art. The designation "the Keats of painting," which his contemporaries favored, is right on target.

Bonington was British-born, French-trained, and very much appreciated in his time. Collectors and fellow artists knew what they had lost when this freshly discovered genius died of sunstroke. He was, on the one hand, a challenge to the Academicians and an imposing (yet not conventional) Romantic. In oil or watercolor, he could be as attentive to representational detail as any Salon painter, yet he makes the whole business of getting the "facts" right less ponderous, less a mechanical exercise in technique and more a function of lively, astute observation, than anyone other than Constable. Yet if the powers-that-be in his age insisted that historical or Biblical themes or aristocratic portraiture were what counted in serious art, Bonington made the best possible case for an artist's right to look to homely scenes—fishmongers at work, horses at rest, the lap of waves—for his subject matter. In his hand, suffused in the delicate light he was a master of, formed by the thinnest applications of paint and the most highly sensitized feel for color effects, these subjects become as crucial as Vermeer's walls and tablecloths (or Whitman's blades of grass or Williams' wheelbarrow) and a good deal more interesting than any number of early nineteenth-century battle scenes or mythological tableaux. Indeed, Bonington has his Turks and Greeks in costume, his medieval monarchs, his renderings of Cervantes and Walter Scott—all superbly done staples of the Romantic Age—but his triumphs, against the constraints of Neo-Classicism and as achievements in and of themselves—are the simple vistas, his marine landscapes. Watercolors like *The Harbor, Le Havre* (1821) or oils like *Ships at Anchor* (1825) make undramatic, evanescent moments timeless and cause us, by their artistry, to stop and savor what might otherwise seem insignificant. That is the real business of poetry, and that is what this painter did before he died at the age of twenty-six.

Curator Patrick Noon's ample, lucid catalogue tells us that Théophile Gautier referred to Bonington as "the most natural colorist" of his time and that Corot honored him as the great inspiration of his youth. Saint-Beuve saw him as part of the triumvirate (along with Delacroix and Gericault) that defined the parameters of Romanticism. For Baudelaire, he was the quintessential anti-academic emblem of Modernity. As a result of the scattering of his oeuvre across the map, some faulty attributions, and a lack of scholarly study, the twentieth century tragically lost sight of Richard Parkes Bonington. The Yale show, a thorough, beautifully displayed exhibition and a cause for much gratitude (aptly subtitled "On the Pleasures of Painting"), reclaims him for us.

Another historical lapse of equivalent proportions was addressed this year by the Stuart Davis retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Of all early American modernists, Davis has occupied the strangest place in art history—neither here nor there, really. Prior

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to this exhibition, no one was likely to have an understanding of him as one of the towering figures of the art of our century; yet that is the impression this show rightly provided. Lowery Sim's catalogue, with essays by her and six other prominent scholars on the major aspects of Davis' career, is must reading for anyone interested in the growth of an artist from realism to Cubism to abstraction, which is to say, with the important aesthetic issues of the modern age. The singular fact about Davis is that, unlike so many of his contemporaries, he actually got the underlying point as well as the technical side of each style exactly right. He holds his own as an Ash Can realist, in his more Expressionist Gloucester and Provincetown works, in his first forays into Cubist spatial divisions, and on into the last phase of geometric abstraction. Davis has always been appreciated for his Eggbeater series and his Paris pictures of the twenties, and his Lucky Strike paintings have been talked to death as harbingers of the Pop Art movement, but what has to come to an end now, after the Met's show, is any further condescension about where he went afterward. The rooms devoted to the work of the 1950s and 1960s didn't display the products of a has-been, a man dwarfed by the new trails blazed by the New York School. *Rapt at Rappaport's* (1952), *Stele* (1956), *Blips and Ifs* (1963), *Unfinished Business* (1962) and quite a few others are the confident quasi-abstractions, robustly painted and daringly composed, of a man still in his prime rather than the last gasps of an old Armory Show veteran. The title "unfinished business" seems particularly apt: Davis knew what he was about and just kept doing it, taking pictorial risks, oblivious to fashion, well into his seventies.

At the galleries: Joan Dickson's recent show at Brooke Alexander contained some exuberant paintings in her usual vein—that is, representational but very painterly views of the city scene from her Times Square studio window—that let us know that her commitment to this style (a modern-day, much darker version of Edward Hopper) hasn't wavered or lost any of its punch. I'm not at all sure that the tondo format she is trying out is the right one for her figure studies; there is something too arty about a small circular canvas for these roughhewn souls. The best painting, one of the larger rectangular pictures, was thick with crusts of black pigment (like the midtown soot itself) and depicted a woman peering anxiously from between the slats of her venetian blinds. The world she looks out on, or is hiding from, is anything but dainty. By way of an absurd contrast, the Sidney Janis Gallery's exhibition of new paintings by Crash, the former subway graffiti artist, was genteel to the point of impotence. If it was unfortunate that Janis père got on the graffiti bandwagon some years back, at least the matter was a debatable one then; it seems indefensible today that his heirs should continue to promote a feeble talent like Crash's. On a subway car, in its calligraphic or figurative form, painted with harsh colors and strong outlines, graffiti can have an arresting visual impact, whatever one wants to say about the

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sociology or ethics of it. On canvas on white gallery walls, in varieties of turquoise, lime green, and other pale colors, these cartoon characters, scrawls, and tags look silly—and pathetically tame. Worse still, the feeling that Crash has been boning up on Pop Art reproductions far removed from urban truths gives many of the paintings a corny, disingenuous aura.

Probably the two best exhibitions to be seen in New York this past winter were the Christopher Wilmarth show at Hirschl & Adler Modern and Gregory Gillespie's portrait survey at the Forum Gallery. Like Bonington, Wilmarth died too young, a suicide in his forties in 1987, but it is good to know that his sleek frosted glass and wood constructions—pure formalism—retain their allure. His playful, elegant sense of shape and materials, contrasts and constructive energy, made him one of the most admired and sophisticated sculptors of his generation. Gillespie, on the other hand, is funky where Wilmarth is "proper" and even austere; his art implies an earthy, healthy, humorous, workmanlike acceptance of life as it is. Part of that life, in the early 1990s, involves Gillespie's own aging process: these self-portraits take us through all the idiosyncratic stages of his life from the tough kid of the late sixties, through the bearded years and the lean years, to a time of graying temples and a bare-chested spreading middle. All of which Gillespie records for posterity with a mode of composition and paint application like no one else's and with deadpan honesty.

A concluding thought for the summer.

David Ross, the new director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, has been referred to before in these pages (*The Hudson Review*, Vol. XLIV, No. 1, Spring 1991, p. 120) as a curator of talent and imagination. His first significant decision as the head of the Whitney, though, is anything but reassuring. Several years ago, the museum decided to reserve its second-floor space for a sampling (meager and lopsided as it was) of its vast permanent collection, while using the third and fourth floors for its changing exhibitions. It was a sensible, long-overdue move. As a result, regular visitors and out-of-towners were able to see both the new shows at the Whitney and the Hoppers and O'Keeffes, the Demuths and de Koonings, the Pollocks and Warhols that should spend as little time in the basement as possible. As of this spring, alas, we were back to all floors of the building being used for changing exhibitions. The implication is that the *history* of American art, from the Ash Can realists to the Abstract Expressionists, is somehow less important than surveys of the current scene. (Hardly a viable notion, with SoHo only a few miles south of Madison and 75th.) This is especially worrisome in view of the recent closings of the Whitney's corporate-sponsored branches, rooms which gave the curators a little more space to work with. I hope we aren't going to have to wait for the construction of the new building to get another glimpse of the permanent collection. That would be a ludicrous development.

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RICHARD HORNBY

Historical Drama

ROBERT SCHENKKAN'S *THE KENTUCKY CYCLE*, performed this past winter at the Mark Taper Forum of the Los Angeles Music Center, is a chronicle play covering two hundred years of the history of eastern Kentucky. Taking six hours to perform, its nine acts are each independent enough to be given a separate title, yet they trace the interrelated fortunes of only three families, from the days of the earliest settlers, through the devastations of the Civil War, the even worse devastations of coal mining starting in the 1890s, to a final moment in 1975 when, with the mines greatly depleted and the market for coal disappearing, the descendents of the original settlers survey the now bleak landscape as if in a daze. All the original rich soil, pure water, and boundless opportunity have dwindled to a paltry, barren, polluted landscape, where the only growth industry is federal relief. The act is entitled, with bitter irony, "The War on Poverty."

The initial act of this ambitious, dynastic piece concerns the earliest white settlers, in 1775, during Indian wars. An escaped indentured servant named Michael Rowen encounters a gun runner in the forest, waiting to make a deal with the Indians. Rowen, it seems, has murdered his former master, and before that, in his native Ireland, killed an Englishman. Rowen's companion kills the gun runner, but then, when the Indians arrive, Rowen is able to save himself by negotiating a deal with them; to prove his sincerity, he murders his companion. In the next two acts, Rowen takes an Indian bride, rapes her, later kills their female infant, and is ultimately killed himself by their grown son. This dreary tale is revisionist history with a vengeance; friendship, law, religion, and family are all depicted as perverse, while even love of the land, although a genuine sentiment, quickly degenerates into land-grabbing and swindling. The ideals that we associate with the early United States are nowhere in evidence. Perhaps someone should remind playwright Schenkkan that Abraham Lincoln was born at this time, in this same Kentucky.

The play becomes more complex and interesting as it moves forward in history, however. The ambiguities of the Civil War, in an area that had few slaves, are vividly depicted. The act set in 1890, when the coal companies were moving into the area, is both poignant and hilarious. A fast-talking slicker buys the mineral rights of the Rowen homestead for a mere dollar an acre, big money for the

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Rowens, but vastly less than those rights are worth. Taking pity on the pretty young Rowen daughter, however, the slicker then convinces her to ask her father to tear up the contract and the check. The father, however, decides that the fellow is just trying to weasel out. The deal goes through, so that the beautiful forest area is devastated, and its traditional rural society transformed into an exploited proletariat.

The scenes of labor strife are powerfully portrayed, equal to anything by Upton Sinclair or John Steinbeck. But the best writing occurs in the penultimate act, "Which Side Are You On?", which takes place in 1954. Joshua Rowen, descendent of the original Michael (and played by the same actor), is president of the local branch of the UMW, which has brought vast improvements in the miners' lives. Now, however, the market for coal is already in decline; some mining companies are bankrupt, and the remaining ones are asking for concessions. An owner of a local mine, no ogre but a man desperately trying to stay in business, gets Rowen to agree to a freeze on pay increases and safety improvements. The result is an enormous explosion in the mine, killing many of the workers—and Rowen's own son. The original theme of killing one's children has become more subtle and indirect, but also more realistic and meaningful.

The Los Angeles production of the cycle, directed by Warner Shook, was briskly paced and generally well acted. The multiple casting of individual actors gave the piece a dramatic momentum, with the ghosts of the past visually haunting the present. In this regard, Charles Hallahan was superb as the original Rowen patriarch, and a number of his descendents. Heavy-set, jowly, and trenchant, Hallahan depicted various characters majestically; each was distinct, yet all seemed to have a family connection, not just because they looked alike (obviously!), but because, whether good or evil, they shared a raw passion. In general, the male actors were almost universally better than the women, who tended toward the shrill and monotonous, but Jeanne Paulsen, rawboned, dignified, and intense, seemed to have stepped out of a Walker Evans photograph.

The early scenes of *The Kentucky Cycle* are heavy-handed, and the dialogue throughout is sometimes stilted and anachronistic. Nineteenth-century characters use phrases like "Say what?", "or whatever," and even "pissed off"! Bankruptcy in the 1950s is spoken of in terms of "Chapter 11," some twenty years before that chapter of the Bankruptcy Act was written. Nevertheless, the Cycle is a major work for our time, a view of American history that is one-sidedly bleak, but a genuine warning of the horrors of exploitation and pollution. With the fall of Communism, it is good to be reminded that laissez-faire Capitalism has its weaknesses too. And though I was tempted to leave after the first few acts, at the end of six hours I was sorry that the play was over.

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Where white American playwrights typically are debunking American history, black playwrights are creating it. Traditionally, blacks were seen as ahistorical. History is about active agents who make choices, thus creating a story with a "plot," a coherent narrative that is driven forward by the characters who people it. When blacks were depicted merely as victims, before or after slavery, they had no story. Victims do not act, but are only acted upon.

August Wilson has been writing a cycle of plays, each set in a different decade of American history. The plays are not interrelated except by being about blacks, but they create a history by depicting moral choices that their black characters make. White people rarely even appear in the plays; white power and oppression are implicit at all times, but the plays certainly do not harp on the sufferings of black victims at white hands. In fact, a common motif is the sufferings that blacks inflict on one another. Wilson has been criticized for this, but a positive image of happy black people with no problems is just as dramatically sterile as one of miserable ones with no options but to suffer. A people are defined by their sins, as the *Iliad* defined the ancient Greeks and the Bible defined the Jews. Or, as Strindberg once put it, who wants happy tragedies?

Wilson's *Two Trains Running*, which I saw at the James A. Doolittle Theatre in Hollywood in February, moved to New York in the spring. Set in Pittsburgh in 1969, it takes place in a small, shabby restaurant owned by a black man nicknamed "Memphis." Outside, crowds have gathered for the funeral of a prominent preacher and prophet; later we hear of a rally celebrating the birthday of Malcolm X. Inside the restaurant, however, the regulars are concerned with their own personal matters. A lethargic waitress slowly prepares meals; an elderly man reads the paper; a numbers runner wheels and deals; a retarded man complains for the thousandth time that he has been cheated out of a promised ham by a local delicatessen owner; a young man just out of prison desperately seeks employment. Memphis, a lively middle-aged man, is trying to get a large compensation from the city for his restaurant, which is slated to be demolished as part of an urban renewal scheme.

As always, Wilson's sense of period is acute. The waning civil rights movement, stunned by the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, and the mindless destruction of traditional neighborhoods by urban renewal, both recall the late sixties all too vividly. Wilson's characters, as usual, are as richly complex as any in Ibsen or Chekhov. Each in his or her own way struggles against fate, rather than accepting it passively or just cursing it. In the end, Memphis, whose farm had been destroyed in Mississippi before he came north, ends up getting twice as much as anyone expected, and "Hambone" even gets his ham.

The plotting of *Two Trains*, however, is slow and erratic. A good deal pivots on an offstage clairvoyant, supposedly 322 years old,

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whose advice is the instrument to Memphis' success. An element of the supernatural occurs in all of Wilson's plays, but here it seems merely a deus ex machina. The program quotes Malcolm X in 1963 with regard to the civil rights movement, that there is a kind of black person in this country who "doesn't want a seat in your restaurant . . . he wants his own restaurant." That conflict, between gain for one's race and gain for oneself, potentially so exciting at the beginning of the play, remains unexplored, yet it was ultimately the main problem for American blacks at the end of the sixties, and remains so today. *Two Trains Running* is the first August Wilson to disappoint, yet it is worth seeing for its rich textures and vivid characterizations, splendidly realized by an outstanding cast.

John Guare writes delicate plays that all too frequently collapse from the whimsical and imaginative into the erratic and silly. His latest piece, *Four Baboons Adoring the Sun*, which opened at the Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center in March, is alternately affecting and affected, until, along with one of its principal characters, it nose-dives into oblivion, in a heavily manipulated conclusion.

The play tells the story of a pair of archaeologists, Penny and Philip McKenzie, who have recently married after a passionate love affair. Both have escaped dreadful previous marriages, and are now spending a glorious summer honeymoon on a dig in Sicily. Soon joined by her five and his four children, the couple hopes at least temporarily to combine them all into a loving, joyous family, in contrast to the former, miserable ones that they are all escaping. The children, ranging in age from seven to thirteen, are, however, just as nasty and unappreciative as one would expect from modern kids in such circumstances. At first suspicious and resentful of Penny and Philip's relationship, they also resist their parents' attempts to interest them in the archaeology and mythology of the area. Then, surprisingly, her eldest daughter and his eldest son announce that they are in love and want to sleep together. When the parents understandably respond with little enthusiasm for such a juvenile liaison, the youngsters run off, make love, and then attempt a double suicide leap in which only the boy succeeds.

On one level, then, *Four Baboons* is a well-made play in the tradition of Ibsen, demonstrating the power of the past on individuals trying to escape from it. This theme is all the more ironic, given the profession of the principal characters; as archaeologists, they unearth the ancient past, but as individuals, they are unsuccessfully trying to bury their own, recent, personal pasts. Also in the Ibsen tradition is a considerable amount of social commentary, as adapted to the late twentieth century, on the instability of sexual relationships, the decline of the family, and the ubiquity of drugs. The girl, it turns out, was on some illicit drug in the past, while her young paramour is a former

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alcoholic—a sad comment on our times, when some drug addicts and alcoholics are even younger than thirteen.

Above this sociological level, however, Guare has awkwardly layered a mythological one. The Greek god Eros, unseen by the other characters, wanders through the play, commenting on the action, manipulating individuals and bringing about their doom. There is an inherent problem here; are the protagonists controlled by their psychological makeup and social circumstances, as in many modern plays, or by the gods, as in ancient tragedy? You really cannot have it both ways. Like modern science, modern tragedy substitutes impersonal forces for personal gods; mixing the two is like having a modern scientist explain a chemical reaction in terms of elves and fairies.

Thus, the characters in *Four Baboons* end up seeming crude and undermotivated. A love affair between a child drug addict and a child alcoholic suggests considerably more complexity in their characters than Guare provides, just as the suicide suggests more elaborate motives than simply the desire to live out a myth. Penny had given all the children mythological names as a pedagogical exercise; the doomed lad got named "Icarus," which he somehow found all too inspiring. It is worth remembering, however, that even Icarus did not *want* to fall. Poor little Wayne's unfortunate plunge is motivated only by Guare's literary pretensions, rather than anything recognizably human.

The matchless Stockard Channing performed the role of Penny with such charm and energy that she made the play bearable. James Naughton was a convincing Philip. The children were effective as a kind of Greek chorus, obviously well coached and letter perfect. Wil Horneff and Angela Goethals were so wooden as the child lovers, however, that, as Oscar Wilde once said of a hapless nineteenth-century actor, their performances might have made a nice gift for a married couple on its fifth anniversary. Guare does not give the children much to go on to demonstrate their love, but one might expect that the two would at least occasionally look at each other!

The Lincoln Center production of the play was directed by Sir Peter Hall, former head of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre Company in London. Hall is noted for his directing of opera, as well as for his visually-oriented productions of Shakespeare. His production of *Four Baboons* was in the same grandiose vein, with a setting reminiscent of an ancient Greek theatre by Tony Walton, resplendent lighting by Richard Pilbrow, and lovely, evocative incidental music by Stephen Edwards. But ultimately, as Aristotle insisted, plot is the soul of tragedy, and strong production elements can never overcome a plot that is disjointed and improbable.

The National Actors Theatre, founded last fall by Tony Randall as a vehicle to allow our best actors to perform in modern classics, has had trouble getting off the ground. I did not see their second

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production, of Feydeau's *A Little Hotel on the Side*, but the reviews suggest that it shared the same problem as the first offering, Miller's *The Crucible*, and the third, Ibsen's *The Master Builder*—bad direction. While I certainly like the idea of a theatre company that highlights the actors rather than the thick-coming fancies of a genius director, actors cannot effectively direct themselves, especially in classical plays.

Tony Randall directed *The Master Builder* himself, apparently his first directorial effort. It is a difficult piece that I would not recommend to a beginner. Written in 1892, it depicts a ruthless, self-educated architect, Halvard Solness, at the peak of his career. He is restless, guilt-ridden, and afraid of being superseded by younger architects. Into his life comes a strange, alluring young woman, who seems to know his deepest secrets, and who claims to have had a sexual encounter with him ten years ago, when she was little more than a child. Under her influence, he climbs to the top of a tower he has just completed, to place a wreath on it, and falls to his death.

The play operates on two levels, the drab, realistic world in which Solness works, and the mysterious, psychological world of the young woman, Hilde Wangel, who talks of trolls and magic kingdoms and harps in the air. It thus shifts back and forth between being a naturalistic play and a symbolist one, largely through the device of two-character scenes between Solness and Hilde, in which her sexual allure and mystical intensity subtly but inexorably enchant him. Just as Solness is not sure whether years ago he actually kissed the youthful Hilde "many, many times," as she insists, so we too are not quite sure if what we are seeing is actually happening or if we have moved inside Solness' mind.

The NAT production never got near the top of Solness' mystical tower. Earl Hyman, usually a commanding actor who should have handled the role well, was fussy and idiosyncratic as Solness, his hands and mouth constantly busy. Acting is a remarkably static art form—the way to draw attention to yourself on stage is to be still—but underdirected actors tend to move about restlessly. Hyman and Madeleine Potter, who played Hilde, rarely seemed to stay in one place for more than an instant; even when they did tarry somewhere for a while, they would shuffle their feet. "Standing your ground" as opposed to "vacillating" are metaphors that have literal application on stage, where vacillating destroys whatever power you might have.

In the case of Potter, that power is not much to begin with. She also played Abigail in *The Crucible*. Why do NAT directors insist on casting this thin, pinched-faced, long-chinned, harsh-voiced woman in the role of archetypal *femme fatale*? Do they see something that I don't? Potter would not tempt me to cross the street, much less climb a tower. Actually, if she had a drop of talent, her meager looks would not matter; Joan Plowright, who is far from beautiful, charmed not only audiences with the role but her co-star, Laurence Olivier—and

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married him. But with Potter, tension, fidgetiness, monotonous loudness, and lack of concentration do not make for sexiness.

The best performances in *Master Builder* were in smaller roles. Lynn Redgrave, whose English background means that she knows her way around a stage, was fascinating as the neurotic Mrs. Solness, who mourns the loss of her childhood dolls in a fire more than the loss of her children. Redgrave seemed to have taken lessons in an American accent from Katherine Hepburn, but that is not a bad model to imitate to get a sense of patrician splutter. Peter McRobbie stole the show in the small role of Ragnar Brovik, the young architect whose career Solness has been holding down. McRobbie has a fine, resonant voice, and knows how to be still, relaxed, and focused. The final scene of the play rarely works well in performance, because the audience must see Solness' offstage fall through the eyes of others. In this case, those others included Redgrave and McRobbie, making it the most effective moment in the play, as it should be.

Ariel Dorfman's prize-winning play *Death and the Maiden*, like his *Widows* (reviewed here last winter), concerns the vile atrocities of the recent dictatorship in his native Chile. One trouble with *Widows* was that it was adapted from the author's novel, with the result that on stage it had an aimless, undramatic sprawl; even worse, its title characters were illiterate peasant women, protesting the torture and murders of their husbands with a stolid inertia, which hardly led to interesting dialogue! *Death and the Maiden*, however, was written for the stage in the first place; its characters—a lawyer, a doctor, and the lawyer's wife—are well-educated and articulate, while the action is not only dramatic but melodramatic.

The lawyer, Gerardo Escobar, has just been appointed head of a commission to investigate the worst crimes of the deposed regime. Not publicly known is the fact that his wife Paulina was herself tortured and repeatedly raped by the secret police. Although she was blindfolded throughout the entire experience, she vividly remembers the man in charge, a doctor who played a recording of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* during the worst moments. Her husband brings home a man whom he met by chance on the road, a doctor who gave him a lift home after he had a flat tire. Convinced by the sound of his voice that it is her torturer, she knocks him unconscious in the middle of the night, ties him up, and gags him. Thirsting for revenge, she then subjects him to a mock trial at gunpoint, which her husband, though appalled at first, helps her to carry out.

The play thus follows a melodramatic pattern: there is a confrontation between heroine and villain, and a plot that keeps the audience gasping. Is the doctor really the torturer? Will she kill him, or only force him to confess? Will he confess? Nevertheless, there are also psychological subtleties that raise *Death and the Maiden* above the level of a thriller. Clearly the horrors that Paulina suffered have affected

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her judgment. As her lawyer husband reminds her, a forced confession is meaningless, while even if the doctor tied to the chair in her living room is indeed the fiendish lover of Schubert, her vigilante behavior will only set a precedent that will destroy her husband's chances to restore justice to their sad country. In the end, the doctor does confess, but when she decides to kill him anyway, he recants the confession, saying that he only invented it with the aid of her husband to avoid being shot. It seems probable that the doctor really is guilty, but there remains enough ambiguity to keep the ending open and compelling.

The New York production of *Death and the Maiden*, directed by Mike Nichols, had an all-star cast, who revived the perennial complaint from minority actors. Why cast a play about Chileans with non-Hispanics? My reaction, as always, came down to the particular actors involved. Glenn Close, an overrated performer, was a shallow Paulina, obviously cast only for her star name, so that the complainers had a good case. The role is made up of sharp contrasts: proper, middle-class wife; devastated victim; gleeful, vengeful fury. Close convinced me only of the first, lacking pain or passion as the other two, and utterly lacking in the ability to shift rapidly from one to another, as the script demands. Gene Hackman, a fine actor, was better as the doctor, but he too had trouble with transitions; he would convincingly respond with terror to the gun at his head, but recover all too quickly when it was removed. After years of acting in film, he seemed to think that the take was over and the director had yelled "cut." Richard Dreyfuss as the lawyer was the best of the three, but had the least interesting role. Ultimately, *Death and the Maiden* is the wife's play, with the two men as her foils. It is a great role for an actress, and since movie stars usually play on Broadway for a limited run, perhaps we should just wait for the replacement.

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HAROLD FROMM

Genius or Fudge? The Clouded Alembics of Magister Poe

There comes Poe with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,
Three fifths of him genius and two fifths sheer fudge . . .
—James Russell Lowell, "A Fable for Critics"

FOR ANYONE INTERESTED IN LITERARY HISTORY, the aesthetics of taste, or the psychology of literary production and reception, Edgar Allan Poe is nothing less than a gold mine, a test "case," in every sense of the word. At one end of the critical spectrum is Bernard Shaw: "Tennyson, who was nothing if not a virtuoso, never produced a success that will bear reading after Poe's failures. Poe constantly and inevitably produced magic where his greatest contemporaries produced only beauty. . . . The story of Lady Ligeia is not merely one of the wonders of literature: it is unparalleled and unapproached. . . . Above all, Poe is great because he is independent of cheap attractions, independent of sex, of patriotism, of fighting, of sentimentality, snobbery, gluttony, and all the rest of the vulgar stock-in-trade of his profession. . . . His kingdom is not of this world." At the spectrum's other end is Harold Bloom: "Whether either *Eureka* or the famous stories can survive authentic criticism is not clear. . . . They are a permanent element in Western literary culture, even though they are best read when we are very young. . . . Uncritical admirers of Poe should be asked to read his stories aloud (but only to themselves!). The association between the acting style of Vincent Price and the styles of Poe is alas not gratuitous. . . . His tales contrast weakly with Hawthorne's, his poems scarcely bear reading."[1] Or to put it another way, one man's genius is another man's fudge.

A spectrum of opinion this broad has been characteristic of Poe's reputation from the start. On the same day as his funeral in 1849 (age

[1] All of the criticism I refer to can be found among the following four collections: *Modern Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, 1985). *The Purloined Poe*, ed. by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore & London, 1988). *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Eric W. Carlson (Ann Arbor, 1969). *Poe: A Collection of Critical Essays* (in Twentieth Century Views), ed. by Robert Regan (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967). Poe's own writings can be best accessed in the two volumes from The Library of America series (New York, 1984).

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forty), his unreliable literary executor, Rufus Griswold, published a memorial that set the pattern for Poe's subsequent American reputation as a brilliant mad degenerate. But once he had been taken up by Baudelaire, Poe became an almost sainted writer in France, to be venerated by the Symbolists for his anti-bourgeois, anti-democratic, anti-didactic art-above-all persona. So infatuated was Baudelaire with Poeian aesthetics that he made verbatim use of sentences from Poe's critical essays, promulgating doctrine that almost a century later became gospel truth for the American New Critics: that poetry's only aim is itself, not morality or representation but the incarnation of self-justifying beauty. "Autotelic" was the buzz word of the 1950s. This formalism became a driving force in the American critical academy, which would thoroughly endorse Baudelaire's Poeian claim that "there are no insignificant details in matters of art." Thus, by an ironic sequence of events, Poe can be said to have cast a modernist net that included in its sweep such diverse characters as T.S. Eliot, Brooks and Warren, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath.

But the intervening American century had much to say that was less unequivocally enthusiastic and some of it still retains a vital force in defining Poe, especially in modernism's aftermath, a time when "art" is regarded as not quite enough. Walt Whitman, in particular, is worth a hearing:

> Almost without the first sign of moral principle, or of the concrete or its heroisms, or the simpler affections of the heart, Poe's verses illustrate an intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess, an incorrigible propensity toward nocturnal themes, a demoniac undertone behind every page—and, by final judgment, probably belong among the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling, but with no heat.

Whitman would finally question Poe's substitution of other-worldly abstractions for the "democratic concretes" of the body, sex, and the earth, wondering whether such a low degree of sensuality had some connection with "current pathological study."

These concerns about morality and pathology were to be developed by others somewhat later on. In one of the most powerful essays ever written about him, Yvor Winters complained in 1937 that Poe was an "obscurantist" writer fixated on technique at the expense of substance. "It is obvious, then, that poetry is not, for Poe, a refined and enriched technique of moral comprehension. It can be of no aid to us in understanding ourselves or in ordering our lives, for most of our experience is irrelevant to it." Zeroing in on the text of Poe's most outlandish aesthetic manifesto, Winters could be said to have seen Poe as a master chemist, dispensing strange dyes, strange colors, and curious odors from his amoral, vaporous alembics, and metering them out in formalist prosodic teaspoons in order to achieve the

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precise effects of style that could produce such a construct as "The Raven" (whose unbelievably self-conscious genesis Poe claimed to be faithfully describing in "The Philosophy of Composition," an account sometimes derided as a hoax).

As for pathology, Marie Bonaparte's 1933 magnum opus, *The Life and Letters of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-analytic Interpretation,* for all its brilliantly attentive readings and pioneering explorations can hardly be read in 1992 as anything other than a parody of an entire episteme:

> The devil who bets and wins Mr. Dammit's head, and the symbolic bridge which beheads him with its iron bracings, were, as we saw, displacements first of the avenging father and then, of the danger-fraught vagina with its imaginary, fearsome teeth. Innumerable are the displacements which went to construct "The Pit and the Pendulum" nightmare. The cell as the contractile womb of the mother, the vaginal pit, and the penis-scythe of Time, are but the most striking.

Though one cries for mercy after mantras such as this, Bonaparte by no means marks the end of the psychoanalytical dispensation, since history reveals her to have been merely John the Baptist for the true and only Christ, Jacques Lacan, whose 1955 seminar on "The Purloined Letter" spawned an entire postmodernist academic industry. But Lacan's unfathomable, unquotable essay has even less bearing on any actual reading of Poe than Bonaparte and since its principal interest is the debate it provoked with Jacques Derrida, die-hard readers are free to consult *The Purloined Poe* to learn how in the intellectual world, as in the planetary, there is profligate energy-inefficiency, justified for the sake of keeping academic loggers busy at their choppings, while the spotted owl of "literary experience" becomes an increasingly endangered species.

Valéry, Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Aldous Huxley, Allen Tate, Richard Wilbur—everybody has had a go at it, but T.S. Eliot was most judicious in assessing Poe's achievement. In his essay, "From Poe to Valéry" (whose first American appearance was in *The Hudson Review* of Autumn 1949), he offered one useful observation after another: on close inspection Poe's writing seems "slipshod," "puerile," "haphazard," not just gothic and romantic. His poems echo those of Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron, yet without seeming English—or American! Poe "is not at home where he belongs, but cannot get to anywhere else." The pleasure we take in his poems and tales is greatest in childhood, but we are not eager to re-read them. "That Poe had a powerful intellect is undeniable: but it seems to me the intellect of a highly gifted young person before puberty." He was a person who did not so much "believe" in ideas as "entertain" them. Yet for all this negativity (a negativity that other New Critics rejected),

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Eliot's positive conclusion about Poe seems correct: that it is not any particular specimen of his work that matters so much as the effect his whole *oeuvre* has had upon French and Anglophone writing. Thus, Poe as the *poète maudit*, the Byronic rebel against society, the art-for-art's sake technician, the aesthetic theorist who went beyond Coleridge into realms of the forbidden and subterraneous, the self-conscious experimenter in poetic effects who strove for a "pure" poetry that not only avoided didacticism but came close to avoiding meaning altogether—all of these were to find their fullest appreciation during the period of late modernism in America.

But read or reread as individual artifacts during our own postmodern *fin de siècle*, Poe's poems and tales still fail to make a very satisfactory showing, even with the exemplary sensitization to his art that the New Criticism afforded us in the fifties and sixties. The poems admittedly have their moments, but most seem derivative and dreadful, with the exception, perhaps, of *The Bells*, a tour de force that actually works (in the terms it sets up for itself), while the tales suffer from faults of construction, rhetoric, and lack of both intellectual and emotional depth (apart from the delvings of depth psychology) that no amount of critical leniency or autotelia can dispel. Whitman and Winters, however much they have been disparaged as moralistic readers of Poe by the New Critics, had a lot to say that was right. Poe's tales do seem unsupported by much sharable feeling (what Whitman called "heat") beyond their overwrought gothic horror, a horror that has been superseded in every way by Hollywood and television, even if their ultimate debt is to Poe himself. The tales do perform like the calculated works of alchemy Poe said (in his critical essays) that he was aiming at, cold and isolated from human life because chiefly concerned with their final "effect." Admittedly, Poe has a considerable range and exhibits real skill: besides the almost unreadably gothic tales such as "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," there are the deft and pioneering "ratiocinative" detective stories, such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Gold-Bug," but their food for non-psychoanalytical thought is strictly low calorie. In the case of the virtuosic terror of "The Pit and the Pendulum," once Poe has performed his hero-in-the-sawmill trick he loses interest and ends the story with a feeble last-minute rescue, concerned more with local *effect* than with the global *affect* of a well-shaped narrative sprung from primal intuitions; and even in such pregnant psychological tales as "William Wilson" and "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe is unable to realize the potentials of his allegorical materials because his constructional machinery can deliver only crude gestures and maneuvers, nor does he seem *really sure* of what it is that he is trying to say, even though he may be on to something major. "The Imp of the Perverse" is spoiled by a baldly abstract exposition that renders anticlimactic the dramatic embodiment that ensues. Though initially powerful, "The Black Cat" col-

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lapses into Poe-etic tics at the moment the protagonist accidentally murders his wife. "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," a lengthy novella, has long stretches of grippingly rendered adventure, told with great fluency, but the story is congested by tedious technical digressions, suddenly shifting rhetorical gears from realist to symbolist in the final few pages. Before reaching a conclusion, it simply stops, appearing essentially unfinished and confused. And could anyone except an ambitious assistant professor now actually read *Eureka* from beginning to end without skipping? Of the well-known tales only "The Cask of Amontillado" seems without flaw—perfect in diction, construction, and overall control of aesthetic materials.

The serious limitations of Poe's individual productions can be grasped by calling to mind a later southern American creator of "gothic" horror: Flannery O'Connor. Whether one likes her beliefs or not, she luminously exemplifies the distinction between *entertaining* ideas and *believing* them, altering one's consciousness indelibly and forever, unsettling and betraying the deepest of self-assurances. "Revelation," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Good Country People" are as implicated with "art" as anything by Poe but have been generated by an interiority connected to a recognizable world whose presence in Poe is only fitful and rare. Poe's unquestionable commitment *was* to art—and sheer survival—but he was heavily dependent upon a laboratory of manipulative alchemies that served as surrogates for "authenticity," for a "center" whose absence makes his writings inscrutable. O'Connor's commitment was to identify and represent the enigmas of human life and to expose the varied but self-deluding subterfuges her protagonists employed to justify themselves in relation to these enigmas, a vocation that *generalized* her art away from aesthetically dangerous private pathology.

The consensus on O'Connor came fast, but a century and a half after Poe's death, it is still not clear how much of his work is genius, how much fudge. When he is seen in terms of his creative potential, his critical/aesthetic insights, and his influence on literary history, one is prepared to grant a good deal of genius. But when he is seen in terms of the finish, the quality of workmanship, of his individual productions, whose unidentifiable psychological centers invite the acrobatic decodings of a Marie Bonaparte and the sometimes extravagant aesthetic claims of New Critics, much can be said for fudge. So one turns for help with eager, probably unrealistic, expectations to the first major biography in fifty years, and what one finds in Kenneth Silverman's *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is itself ambivalent. Silverman is a master biographer who has pulled together prodigious material into an eminently readable narrative—sane, judicious, intelligent, professional in every way. Although his is not a "critical" biography, it does examine many of the writings and offers balanced, impartial opinions of their quality that reinforce

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one's confidence in his judgment. To maintain narrative continuity and avoid ponderousness, Silverman generally avoids reference to critics and their works, so the critical tradition, while not wholly absent, is played down and Poe's writings are used principally to enrich the ongoing psychological portrait. Moreover, Silverman is loath to press a thesis or a doctrinaire critical approach, because he clearly wants this account to remain valid for a long time to come (as it certainly will). "As this biography is not an argument but a narrative, no attempt will be made to 'prove' that the psychoanalytic prototype of the bereaved child applies to him, still less to examine by its light his every word and action."[2] Despite this disclaimer, however, Silverman's approach is unambiguously Freudian. Indeed, Silverman's theme, as represented in his subtitle, is in the line of Marie Bonaparte, who quotes from Poe's tale, "Morella" ("Thou shalt bear about with thee thy shroud on the earth. . . .") and remarks that these are "words which might equally have been spoken by Elizabeth Arnold to the little son whom, by her fate [of early death], she doomed to eternal mourning." Bonaparte continues: "Due, however, to the original incest prohibition, which imposed a sex barrier between mother and child, the boy's first resentment is later visited on the wife [Virginia Poe], with the result that his 'joy' fades 'into horror,' " screwing him up for the rest of his life. Despite Bonaparte's excesses, this thesis works well enough not only in her account but in Silverman's too, yet Silverman's approach is not as theoryless as he would seem to have wished and at times even *his* Freudianism becomes oppressive: "In current psychoanalytic thinking about persons suffering prolonged and unresolved grief, the wish to devour also represents primitive attempts at preserving loved ones, incorporating them so as not to lose them, filling oneself to make up for (and to that extent deny) the loss. The lip-smacking devil in 'The Bargain Lost' is just such a gourmand of the dead." Particularly vexing is his insistence throughout the biography on Poe's obsession with the names "Allan" (his betraying benefactor) and "Poe" (his absconding father), which he loads with *importance* but not with really rewarding *significance*: "The asylum is superintended, it might be added, by a Monsieur Maillard, a name in which *Allan* again nearly resurfaces, as it also does in keeper-inmates named Laplace, Boullard, and Gaillard." "The name Tsalal . . . again encapsulates the double *l* double *a* of Allan." "Like the painter, Prince Prospero (twice or thrice *Poe*) . . . ," and so on. The returns on this investment are small.

What Silverman does supply to perfection is an account of the activities of Poe's forty years of life, an unmitigated horror of loss, poverty, and disappointment. His mother, an actress from childhood, died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four while his father, David,

[2] EDGAR A. POE: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance, by *Kenneth Silverman*. HarperCollins Publishers. $27.50, pp. 77–78.

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had deserted her sometime earlier. Poe and his brother and sister were farmed out to different foster parents, Edgar ending up with John and Fanny Allan in Richmond, Virginia. Though Allan was affluent and supported Edgar well, enabling him to attend the newly-founded University of Virginia for a year, until he dropped out because of gambling debts and bad behavior, Allan never adopted him, a traumatic blow from which Poe never recovered. Schooled for a while in England, with subsequent short terms in the U.S. Army and at West Point, Poe started publishing his writing while still in his teens. But as his relationship with Allan became increasingly fractious Edgar was more or less abandoned altogether, though he made various unsavory attempts to recover Allan's esteem and, more urgently, his financial support. After one unsuccessful attempt at betrothal to another woman, he ended up marrying his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm and not only lived with her and his aunt until Virginia died at twenty-four of tuberculosis, like his mother, but continued to be taken care of by Maria Clemm until his own death in 1849.

Poe went through a series of connections with literary periodicals of varying levels of sophistication, generally improving their circulation as editor while contributing large quantities of tales, poems, criticism, and "marginalia," often using the same materials more than once. But his professional liaisons were short-lived and never produced much money, so that there were times when he literally did not know where his next meal was coming from. Alcoholism and drug-taking frustrated his larger opportunities, such as a government sinecure in Washington that was never offered because of his drunken and eccentric visit there. Though a few of his writings, "The Raven" and "The Gold-Bug," caught on and made him a popular figure, even in France, and though he wrote bitter, hypercritical reviews of his contemporaries that made him notorious but avidly read, his skill at messing up his life was virtuosic. When his beloved Virginia died after years of suffering and decline, he was literally kept alive by the ministrations of his aunt that included begging friends and relatives for money for their food and rent. Poe's last few incredible years of ill health and psychological derangement were spent trying to get three or four different women to marry him, though as each episode moved closer to consummation his terror grew greater. He died mysteriously in the streets of Baltimore, possibly from alcohol or drugs, on returning from arrangements to marry a childhood sweetheart in Richmond.

Against this background of misery, Silverman appreciates Poe's varied and substantial achievements, some of which I have already outlined, but the overall effect of his narrative is damaging, probably more than he actually intended. Poe's mendacity was pathological, including misrepresentations of his family roots and social class, claims of travel to countries he never visited, exaggerated reports of his athletic

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prowess and victory in fistfights, pretenses at knowing languages he actually could not read, denials of his addiction to drink and drugs, and wholesale plagiarism committed while simultaneously attacking other writers for their own literary robberies. His "Letter to B ____," an early critical manifesto, depends for its most important moment ("A poem, in my opinion, is opposed to a work of science by having, for its *immediate* object, pleasure, not truth . . .") on a theft from Coleridge, but this is just the tip of an iceberg, for "he had fallen into a routine of easy lies and half truths since at least his adolescence." Even as regards his dead wife, Virginia, he told Helen Whitman, one of his later marriage prospects, that "he regarded Virginia as a sister and a child who 'could not enrich his life,' with whom he could experience 'little reciprocity of thought,' whom he had married solely for her own happiness," a series of preposterous lies about a woman, as he earlier wrote a friend, "whom I loved as no man ever loved before." (Admittedly, nothing that Poe ever said can be trusted.) Silverman excels in providing insight into these vices: "Yet like his early imitation of Byron, his various pseudonyms, and his appropriating his brother's adventures, Edgar's ease in taking over and passing off as his own the ideas, opinions, and expressions of other people does imply a feeling of not being someone definite." He is especially good on "The Philosophy of Composition," which he regards as "but a larger and more fortified hedge against his increasing irrationality. Patiently, lengthily, minutely dissecting 'The Raven,' he showed that he wrote the poem by exercising a methodical, total control. . . . Poe's fearful preoccupations and anxious state repeatedly emerge through the philosophical reasonings meant to master and conceal them. . . . The voice that speaks . . . throughout 'The Philosophy of Composition' recalls that of the crazed narrators in some of Poe's tales, whose tone of eerie calm is intended to demonstrate their lucidity and self-control, but arouses only the reader's fear and pity."

Where Silverman falls short is in his capacity as literary critic. Beyond demonstrating the biographical connections between Poe's art and his life and the neurotic symptoms that underlay them, he does not know quite what to do with the tales and poems as literary constructs. As in the case of the Allans and Poes imputedly permeating the works, after Silverman's literary discussions the reader is inclined to say, "Very well, very well, but what can you tell me about this tale as meaningful art?" One illustration will serve for many:

> Getting his hero in trouble and keeping him there, Poe created in *Pym* a classic adventure story, through which he gave body to the classic theme of illusion. The deceit begins with the preface, a dizzying verbal hall of mirrors that confuses author and protagonist, fact and fiction. The narrative proper brings both Pym and the reader into a treacherous world of disguises, forgeries, and impersonations where appearances lie. Pym's friendly dog Tiger threatens to devour him. . . . the seemingly fiendish Dirk Peters befriends

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him, and the capsizing of his ship reveals not new perils but a keel encrusted with nutritious barnacles that save him from starvation.

Silverman goes on to enumerate examples of the characteristic Poeian theme of life and death simulating each other, points out the repeated breakdown of order, and recalls people from Poe's past whose names are used or echoed in this novella, observing along the way that "a deeper but more elusive presence in the book is Eliza Poe," and "Pym's desire is not only to feed but also to be consumed." All of this information, of the sort only an expert can provide, is valuable and enlightening, but it rarely gets to the semantic or aesthetic heart of any of the stories. "Why is this tale the way it is and not otherwise?" is the baffled reader's cry. One feels much sympathy for Silverman's critical inadequacy, because trying to locate the heart of a Poe work is the crux that any sensitive reader is destined to face for himself. Yet, however unfairly, one continues to hope for more.[3]

Thus the "ambivalence" with which I earlier characterized this biography would seem to have arisen from Silverman's desire to present Edgar Poe as a major American author while providing a scrupulously detailed confrontation with materials that—as things turn out—end up darkening our sense of his character and his life. At the same time, however, this penetration into the deepest shadows both clarifies our misunderstandings and obscures our understandings of Poe's writings. The center of Poe's life and art recedes yet further to a nebulous *world elsewhere*, a world that neither psychoanalytic nor aesthetic theory has adequately managed to render. Success in this endeavor would consist not so much in psyching Poe out once and for all as in enabling us to understand a body of writing—*piece by piece*—whose key seems ever more elusive. But it is hard to envision what form such success could possibly take. Insofar as Poe's oeuvre has appealed to a large number of readers and exerted its influence on literary history, theory, and taste, it would have to be taken as already successful. But insofar as suffocating theories are needed to make intelligible the individual poems and tales (writings that many qualified readers cannot bear), one has a sense of failure. Silverman's biography, a major contribution to literary history, does not otherwise alter this status quo. For the moment, at any rate, T.S. Eliot's emphasis on the value of Poe's work *as a whole* continues to be rewarding. Whether Poe's stories and poems can still actually be read past adolescence—or even at all, in a TV era he helped to create—remains an open question.

[3] As Lacanian analysis begins to wear itself thin, the latest wave in Poe studies may very well belong to the cultural materialists. Like the Henry James industry, *E. A. Poe & Associates, Inc.* seems to be involved with such questions as Poe and his sources (in his case, plagiarism as well), Poe and the mass market, etc.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Uncommon Common Readers

AFTER SOME STRONGLY ADVERSE CRITICISM directed at Thomas Gray's odes, Samuel Johnson turned, in the final paragraph of his *Life of Gray*, to "Elegy in a Country Churchyard" and "rejoice[d] to concur with the common reader" about its high merit. Johnson described this reader as "uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning," and more than one writer since Johnson has deferred to such a figure, or constituency. Referring to the common reader as "him," Virginia Woolf called herself one and titled her first series of essays in his honor; now Clara Claiborne Park invites us to rejoin the same party.[1] The notion of this reader, still holding on despite learning's subtlety and dogmatisms to his or her sensible and clear-sighted values, is an appealing one—especially as the latest bulletins pour in of fun and games in the academic arena.[2] Clara Park is an academic herself, an English professor at Williams College, before that at a community college—she writes interestingly about teaching in the latter. We also learn, from an affectionate and (as always) witty foreword by the late Howard Nemerov, that she took to teaching only after raising her

[1] REJOINING THE COMMON READER, by *Clara Claiborne Park*. Northwestern University Press. $29.95; $14.95.

[2] I can't resist sharing one of the most notable items of foolery recently to grip my attention, from a university press book that claims to be about Alexander Pope:

> Such self-relfexivity as characterizes Pope's *Essay* [ON CRITICISM] is produced by folds, by the poem's folding back upon itself, trying to fold itself up. When a text engages in such an effort, as Derrida has shown, "it creates . . . an 'invaginated pocket,' in which an outside becomes an inside and an inner moment is granted a position of exteriority." Invagination Derrida defines as "the inward refolding of *la gaine* [sheath, girdle], the inverted reapplication of the outer edge to the inside of a form where the outside then opens a pocket." The process of invagination is so complex that Derrida proceeds to "situate the place, the locus, in which *double invagination* comes about, the place where the invagination of the upper edge on its outer face . . . , which is folded back 'inside' to form a pocket and an outer edge." Adopting Derrida's formulation, we might say that when *An Essay on Criticism* seeks to do and be what it describes and advocates, folding back upon itself, it creates an invaginated pocket. The outside thus becomes an inside, but if the outside comes inside the inside is, then, not simply an inside.
>
> —G. Douglas Atkins, *Quests of Difference* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1986), pp. 33–34.

It goes on, and the interested reader may contact me for further details. But you'd almost think it wasn't about Pope's *Essay*, wouldn't you.

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children. Perhaps that encounter with Real Life has helped keep her sane.

At any rate, *Rejoining the Common Reader* consists of thirteen sane essays and an afterword; spanning thirty years, they include critical appraisals of writers and their work: Jane Austen, Trollope, Flannery O'Connor; Shakespeare's comedies and James Merrill's *Divine Comedies*, as well as more speculative pieces on subjects like memory, the notion of a "speaker" in poetry, and the work of Roland Barthes. Characteristic of them all is a sense of unhurried leisure in exposition and an artfully maintained conversational tone taken toward the reader as an intelligent equal, interested in books and ideas, with no particular axe to grind or system to exploit. For example, "The Mother of the Muses," an essay about memorizing poetry, settles on a telling instance of the uses of such an activity. Park quotes Jimmy Carter's tribute to his boyhood English teacher, Miss Julia Coleman—who required the students in Plains, Georgia, "to memorize and recite long poems and chapters from the Bible"—and notes that although, of course, we have left such education behind (it surely didn't invite questioning or require understanding), it did "make elevated language a familiar possession":

> In December 1979 Jimmy Carter had a grave matter to talk about on television: an embassy attacked, citizens held hostage. So he dredged up two lines of poetry from the long ago, and spoke them with unusual feeling:
>
> > God is not dead, nor does He sleep;
> > The right is strong, and shall prevail. . . .
>
> Not the first lines of Longfellow's poem, not particularly famous, and so not likely to be the contribution of a speech writer—Miss Julia's legacy, rather, waiting in the memory bank.

She goes on to argue that such a moment demonstrates a "sounder, more genuine relationship to poetry . . . than in all the elaborate and self-conscious presidential noticing of poets that began with John Kennedy."

In the essay she is rightly concerned with the possibility that classroom analysis of poems may be a substitute for reading them aloud, for getting them heard, for memorizing and storing them. This is an uncommon thing for an academic to worry about, and it's typical of what you might call—if the abused word were still permissible—Clara Park's humanism. She really does care more for poetry than for critical essays about it, and (sorry, Dr. Derrida) she even "privileges" the human voice over writing, since

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> . . . now the important thing is not to learn to speak the poem ourselves or listen to it, but to learn to characterize in writing how it should be spoken. It's not easy for the freshmen or for us. The limits of the English adverb are quickly reached. "Playfully"? "Seriously"? "Sarcastically"? (The freshmen love that word, though they don't know what it means.) "Ironically" most treacherous of all?

She notes that gifted senior English majors can read in complicated ways but don't understand her when she tells them that a line doesn't scan. And she's convinced there are learned Ph.D. candidates who know fewer lines of poetry by heart than Jimmy Carter does. I trust her on this just as I trust the instincts of someone who is enough of a veteran classroom teacher to know that freshmen love to describe complicated moments of poetic, ironic speech with the all-purpose word "sarcastically."

The two best critical essays in the collection are on Flannery O'Connor and on the fortunes of the dramatic "speaker" in poetry. About O'Connor she says what someone, in all the books about this writer, should have said long before this. (It's more or less what I say in my classes when I teach O'Connor, which is of course why I salute Clara Park.) Briefly, her point is that while O'Connor warned against crude explanations or extractions of "meaning" from her stories, she herself regularly provided such explanations in lectures and letters. So even as O'Connor warned against "instant answers" from fiction, she went ahead and provided them in her commentaries. In fact, as Park notes, "Instead of renewing mystery they (the explanations) relocate it, transferring it from the characters and events of the story to the realm of theology." And the stories grow less rich because of such explication, since they become merely exemplars of Christian redemption through violence and pain (the shooting of the grandmother at the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is a prime example of such "redemption"). Park neatly sums it up: "As incursions of grace through arson and through murder and through sudden stroke become familiar to the point of predictability, all moral ambiguity evaporates, leaving the stories that puzzled us all too clear." Since O'Connor's stories, admirable as they are, have been admired all too uncritically, this fresh approach is especially welcome.

The other essay which breaks new ground is "Talking Back to the Speaker," and maybe only an English teacher can be fully interested in this subject. It is however a fascinating one for those of us who, back in college in the 1950s, were warned against reading, say, Wordsworth's "To a Butterfly" and beginning a sentence about it with "Wordsworth says" or "Wordsworth feels that." No, we were told, the figure or consciousness in the lyric was not "Wordsworth" but a fictional dramatized "speaker," and it was illicit to confuse the two. Park sets out to locate the moment in this century at which "the poet"

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was displaced by "the speaker." She doesn't find speaker-talk in Eliot or in I.A. Richards, or in Empson or Blackmur—evidently they had no trouble expressing their original perceptions about poetry in language that still preserved the particular poet in the poem. Even in Cleanth Brooks's *Understanding Poetry* or Reuben A. Brower's *The Fields of Light* (which begins by telling students about the difference between poet and dramatic speaker), there is no consistency in practice and (for example) Brower is quite willing to refer to what "Shelley"—rather than a dramatic speaker—says in the fourth stanza of "Ode to the West Wind." Park's analysis was illuminating to me, and I cheer her conclusion about the matter:

> You'd have to be pretty unsophisticated to believe that the speaker who utters Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is the author as he exists in his everyday life, but you'd have to be more sophisticated than I care to be to believe that he's not Keats at all. I would prefer my students to recognize that poets are just folks, arted up a bit, perhaps, but still doing for the most part the same sort of thing their teachers do when they write an article, that they themselves do when, without thinking, they alter their tone for a parent or an employer or a friend.

One mild complaint: she commits what for me is the unforgivable sin by speaking (in "No Time for Comedy") of Anthony Trollope's "modest gifts" ("His modest gifts did not include mythmaking").[3] And her 1962 essay, "Trollope for Grown-Ups," should have been updated, at least prefaced by a note telling us whether, over the intervening thirty years, she's had any second thoughts about Trollope and whether she's now read novels, unmentioned in her essay, like *The Three Clerks* or *He Knew He Was Right* or *The Vicar of Bullhampton* or *Ayala's Angel* or others that have provided me with substantial pleasure in recent years. Since I agree with Ford Madox Ford that Trollope and Jane Austen are the two great English realist novelists of the nineteenth century, I must believe that no one of merely "modest gifts" could write *The Prime Minister* (which she does

[3] With respect to Park I felt somewhat like an Anthony Powell character, General Liddament (in *The Military Philosophers*), when he finds that Nick Jenkins thinks a good deal less of Trollope than he, the general does:

> "You've never found Trollope easy to read?"
> "No, sir."
> He was clearly unable to credit my words. This was an unhappy situation. There was a long pause while he glared at me.
> "Why not?" he asked at last.

Actually Park worries that Trollope may be a bit too easy to read ("One wants some sort of excuse for reading Trollope—a long convalescence, or an ocean trip").

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mention) or *The Duke's Children,* mythmaking capacity or not. But this demur only proves the rule that Clara Claiborne Park is usually right on target. As for the "common reader" business, we should remember (as Frank Kermode points out in his essay on the subject) that while Johnson rejoiced to concur with such a reader, he himself was "a different animal altogether."[4] So, on the basis of this collection, is Clara Claiborne Park an uncommonly good reader.

The common reader comes into play again—on the dust jacket of Harold Fromm's collection of essays about the foibles of current literary study—when Roger Kimball (*New Criterion* regular and author of *Tenured Radicals*) calls it an "attempt to recapture literature for the common reader."[5] If that is really Mr. Fromm's attempt, it's surely a quixotic one: where, conceivably, are those readers, yearning to have literature recaptured for them, who will get hold of Fromm's book and feel their cause advanced? A better way of putting it is to say that Fromm is an uncommon reader who has so thoroughly immersed himself in current theory, new historicism, black, feminist and Marxist modes of analysis, that the resultant book is a fight for his own life as a potentially doomed species—as an uncommon, unattached reader. And it is a fighting book, as attested to by the following paragraph from an essay titled "Literary Value":

> The chief disabling characteristic of recent criticism, the practice that most consistently alienates the reader from any possibility of emotional union with the work, is the assumption that it is the sophisticated critic's task *not to heed the voice of the author.* To heed it, according to this practice, is to be a too-willing victim of the work's power, to be turned into swine by the charms of Circe. Rather the sophisticated critic wants to unmask and disable the voice of the author in order to show what it really is—in all its bogus, shabby, self-deceiving, and fake authenticity. To truly read Milton, in this vein, is to hear the rationalizations of a licentious, puritanical misogynist. To read Charlotte Brontë is to acknowledge another victim of patriarchy and class struggle. To read Virginia Woolf is to recognize the muffled protests of someone steamrolled by Victorian medical advisors and a tyrannically repressive husband. The critic shouts as loudly as possible so that the voice of the author will not be heard over the more enlightened din of his or her own voice, a voice that speaks more truly because it is not taken in by the power of the author.

[4] Frank Kermode, "The Common Reader," in *An Appetite for Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 48.

[5] ACADEMIC CAPITALISM AND LITERARY VALUE, by *Harold Fromm.* University of Georgia Press. $35.00; $16.00.

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Fromm's own voice is that of someone who has been enraged and saddened by what recent examples of this "enlightened din" have made of Brontë and Woolf among others (elsewhere in the book he takes up specific instances of the din in relation to those writers). It is also the voice of a critic who is proud to speak, still, of "the author," and who believes it is good to achieve something like "emotional union" with the work of art. In the interests of combating manifest exaggerations made of authors by "sophisticated" critics, Fromm doesn't mind exaggerating a bit himself.

If you have a taste for polemics (and why shouldn't you?) Mr. Fromm's attack on what he calls academic capitalists, especially those who have invested in the going, new approaches to literary study, is both ingratiating and extremely well-informed. Compared to Roger Kimball's critique of academic follies, Fromm's goes deeper—though Kimball is superb at evoking the madness of literary symposia and conventions. But Fromm's critique is not at all an external one: he engages at length with Henry Louis Gates and Mary Louise Pratt in a "'Race,' Writing, and Difference" symposium (published in *Critical Quarterly*), and with Jerome McGann's historicist insistence on how the text has to be studied only through all its original and changing circumstances, and with the overreadings of a clever analyst of poetry like J.D. McClatchy. He is at pains not to caricature or otherwise simplify these and other critics, and he is generous, often, in recognizing their strong points (McClatchy has a "daunting knowledge" of contemporary poetry; McGann is a textual historian of "impressive skill and erudition"). Only at certain moments does he drop good manners, as when, quoting from some wearying piece of gymnastics by J. Hillis Miller, he confesses that, reading the essay years after it was first published, "we can hardly believe that there was a time when respected intellectuals could have uttered such drivel with impunity (except for the fact that they are doing it even now)." He takes heart that Miller has probably since repudiated the analysis, given that his recent subject has been "ethics."[6]

In a preface, Fromm characterizes himself as "at present an independent scholar, though in essence still an academic." Although I don't know the circumstances of his present independence from the academy, it feels symbolically right that he should be an observer who, in the book's conclusion ("Oppositional Opposition"), argues that the only "radical" position plausible today is that of "skeptical non-alignment, using a bit of this and a bit of that." As opposed to such oppositional eclecticism, current critical practice reveals the prevalence of several themes:

[6] Having heard Miller deliver himself recently on that subject ("The Ethics of Reading") in his authentically boring manner, I must assure Fromm that things haven't improved, even if his subject is slightly different.

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> —That once the "search for truth" and "knowledge for its own sake" have been disallowed as rationalizations for scholarly activity, most academic "production" (and here the Marxist term is fully apposite) must be considered as just one form of industry among others, with self-interest, success, and profit as the final goals—in sum, as academic capitalism. . . .
>
> —That many critics and theorists, more interested in political goals than intellectual activity or aesthetic response, malappropriate literary works toward these ends. What is so curious about this development is that the political goals are likely to be purely theoretical, because the real aim is personal success and power, not genuine ethical reform in the world. . . .
>
> —That once literature is devalued to the role of political instrument (both for the writer and the critic), the cultural rationale for justifying the creation, appreciation, or profession of literature disappears. Literary study becomes just another social science. . . .

Summed up, the indictment runs like this:

> The shift to politics and sociology has resulted in an alienation of the reader, not just in the sense of turning him or her away from literary works except as ideological documents, but in the deeper sense of separating the reader as thinker from the reader as affective consciousness, as someone who *feels* what he reads as lived emotion. Not only can the reader be confused into self-distrust when skillful novels and poems are dragged down into social pathologies by culture critics reading them as symptoms of their time—he can be baffled into incomprehensibility by the way in which inept, third-rate performances like *Frankenstein* have been cried up by feminist politics into "masterpieces."

This is particularly stirring stuff since Mary Shelley's novel has been treated recently as if it were just this side of *Emma* or *Middlemarch* as significant art.

Fromm even goes so far as to challenge the notion that "extreme intimacy with the words of a text" affords specially privileged, "better" readings. After a certain point, he argues, the law of diminishing returns takes over, and even as the reading becomes "richer" it may move us further away from the "*fiat lux* that gave the poem its initial existence." Here, I think, he arrives at a place similar to Park's when she worries that analyzing the poem rather than reading it aloud may entail real imaginative losses. And just as Park might be accused of "essentializing" voice, by over-believing in the virtue of hearing the poem read aloud, so Fromm, with his invoking of the *fiat lux* responsible for a poem, is essentializing something like the poet's

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"intention." Both critics are old-fashioned, then, in that they believe literature is something more than and not to be reduced to "writing." Indeed Fromm is so old-fashioned that at one point he even rounds on the fashionable current wisdom that everything—judgments, critical approaches, literary principles—is "political" (a departmental colleague informed me of this truth awhile back). In his enlightening discussion of a number of books about Charlotte Brontë, he makes distinctions between the programmatic nature of some of them (Terry Eagleton,[7] Gilbert and Gubar) and less programmatic, more persuasive ones. He wants to assert a distinction between

> what is indeed merely and unabashedly political and what are the unavoidable limitations of individual existence in the world; between the conscious, voluntary and perhaps "political" choices of our day-to-day behavior (such as writing a certain type of book about Charlotte Brontë) and the unrecognized finitudes of society and personality that provide us all with ineluctable predilections and tics in a world where we must be either fat or thin, kind or cruel, smart or dumb.

We can't be, as Matthew Arnold wanted critics to be, completely disinterested (and Arnold as a critic was hardly disinterested), since we must all act from some motivation or other:

> But to call all motivation and action political because they stem from human interests and finitudes is like calling all behavior selfish because it satisfies human needs. Within the spectrum of human behavior there is a range from selfish to unselfish, from political to unpolitical, and most people can discern the difference.

If this reminds us somewhat of Dr. Johnson dealing with Berkeley's philosophy by kicking the stone ("I refute it *thus*"), I don't think Fromm would mind too much.

I have said nothing about one quality that characterizes his style (and also Clara Claiborne Park's), namely its ironic humor. There is the more than occasional apt comparison, as when he refers to the prose of Hillis Miller as "the deconstructive jukebox [playing] its worn out old records," or when he eviscerates a really awful-sounding book by one James Kavanagh on Emily Brontë (from a Blackwell's Marxist/feminist series titled, ominously, "Rereading Literature"). He quotes,

[7] I've been notified by a friend that Eagleton, the Warton Professor of English Literature at Merton College, Oxford, has recently opined that, if we bear in mind racist, feminist, and elitist questions, "The study of English literature might just be defensible." This is of course good news, and Eagleton has always been a wag. The trouble is that he means it.

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without unnecessary comment, Kavanagh's Lacanian monkeyshines as applied to *Wuthering Heights*: "Nelly works to pull Cathy out of an imaginary self-annihilation into the heat of the Father's phallic desire, only to pull her into a Symbolic order whose potentially liberating linguistic power is recuperated for another kind of morbidity and closure under the cold hand of the dead Father's law." Fromm observes, correctly, that this is beyond parody—indeed it is almost in a class with the paragraph "about" Pope I quoted at the beginning of this review. Fromm's art as a critic consists partly in not saying too much, just enough, about the weird specimens of "criticism" he dredges up—as with this one in which Kavanagh, ostensibly writing about Heathcliff, quotes bits from Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction*:

> Or, in more pointed language, he is a prick. . . . The prick is "beyond good and evil," "beyond the phallus." Phallocentrism . . . [is] an upright matter. The prick, in some crazy way, is feminine.

"And so on, in some crazy way," observes Fromm.

In a nicely turned admission he says, responding to cultural critiques that make heavy weather out of how we're all necessarily "situated," thus bound by ideologies, thus not truly autonomous, etc., that

> Of course very few of us intellectual sorts ever really supposed we were fully autonomous or that we had invented ourselves; and we certainly acknowledge that had we been born in another time, another place, or from other parents, we would be other people with other truths. Except for occasional megalomania, most of us feel only too subjected to forces material and otherwise, and so we are largely ready to buy into the notion that what we say and do is "situated." That is why it was Dostoevsky and not I who wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*. My own situation just was not right for it.

An invigorating book, then, and—like Clara Claiborne Park's—a useful aid to keeping one's head while some, it may seem, are losing theirs.

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DICK ALLEN

Bad, Better, Best

UNTIL ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, most of the nation's poetry reviewers, in dealing with all but the finest collections, followed two main principles: "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all"—thus eliminating poetasters from serious consideration by better literary journals—and the time-honored "damn with faint praise." When a talented poet was reviewed, even reviewed by a friend or admirer, the criticism of the work was generally forthright, and sometimes even savage. How times have changed!

Right now scores of earnest literary publications proclaim the validity of their critics' endorsements, but we are apt to find so little objectivity in their reviews and choices of reviewers that blurbs derived from their pages have become meaningless. The poetry "review" for the most part has turned into a "description" of the kind Alfred Corn defends in the December 1991 issue of *Poetry* or the kind of fatuous "appreciation" Richard Howard has so equally ladled out to so many poets that it long ago became impossible to take the bulk of his evaluations seriously. Or we have replications of the kind of glib, friendly statement that the nation's poetry blurb-king, William Matthews, glues to the backs of multitudinous book jackets like so many T-shirt slogans.

Poetry is so underappreciated, the feeling seems to be, that even the slightest of books is cause for celebration just by the fact of its appearance. Moreover (I'm breaking a conspiracy of silence here, what used to be called a "gentleman's agreement"), since most contemporary poets are reviewed by other contemporary poets, these reviewers are subject to the fear of committing poetic suicide.

There is fear on the part of the poet-critic that when his or her own book comes up for review by a poet he or she severely chastised, the criticized poet will either choose not to review the book or will treat it unfairly in retaliation; fear that the poet criticized will take anonymous revenge by turning the critic's book down for a significant prize, or will sit on a committee that will turn down the critic's grant application; fear, especially if the critic is young, that he will alienate the poet's friends who sit on similar committees or are consultants for the publishing houses with which he himself would like to publish; fear of meeting the heavily-criticized poet at a reading or a party or on a panel or in a dark alley (with A.W.P. and Poets & Writers and other semi-unions, the poetry world in America has become even more

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incestuous than that of fabled London); fear (or is it compassion at work here?) that a negative review of a fellow poet's book will keep that poet from a university teaching post or tenure or advancement at his college or university; fear of not being sufficiently politically correct in treating poems by women, by men, by blacks, by Hispanics, by Asians, by Arabs, by gays, by lesbians, by heterosexuals. . . . So for the most part we have a dishonest, mealy-mouthed poetry criticism at the very time when "honesty" is supposedly a hallmark of the finest poetry. Extensive praise given to weak books, especially when the books are written by potentially fine poets, is harmful both to the art as a whole, and to the poets' evaluation of their own work; it tends to perpetuate the poetry's weaknesses.

Appreciations done without real spine actually say to the poet: *I don't take your work seriously enough to tell you when I think it's bad.* Moreover, such appreciations, or boring and evasive graduate school term-paper descriptions, make a strong counter-evaluation by other critics seem unnecessary, make contemporary poetry continue to seem non-controversial, languishing in its bubbling concoction of non-evaluative notices. Why attack a marshmallow critic and his marshmallow reviews? He didn't say anything *bad*, did he?

The fears I've mentioned are not only harmful but insulting to the poet and to the world of poetry itself. Giving in to them says we do not believe any true poet judges others' work on its quality alone. Yet we *have* to believe in objectivity; we have to believe in the lack of pettiness of our fellow poets; we have to believe that Poet X, sitting on her awards committee, will say to herself, "Poet Y thinks my poetry is shit, damn her. I know she's wrong but I think Y is a terrific poet herself. Give her the grant."

Otherwise, in a climate like ours, in which almost every poetry collection appears to someone's wild acclaim, the inferior productions will continue to obscure the best work, whether this best work be the one excellent poem in a weak book with, say, forty-one others, or the one truly outstanding book in a sea of mediocrity. No wonder that, in general, even the educated public doesn't know which contemporary poets and poems are most worth reading.

Mary Kinzie is a serious poet-critic whose criticism has always displayed sensitivity and keen intelligence. Her third collection, appearing one year after her second, contains a few good poems, most notably, "Sound Waves," "Texas, with Dry Mimosa" and "Little Brown Jug," all skilled rhymed constructions.[1] Most of the book's remaining poems, however, are wordy, even garrulous, and often flawed by the inclusion of such clichéd phrases as "Clear as a glass," "memory of pain," "slips through . . . like a ghost," "shivers with delight," "Rooted in doubt," "brutal moment," "laughter shrilled like

[1] AUTUMN EROS AND OTHER POEMS, by *Mary Kinzie*. Alfred A. Knopf. $19.00.

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bells," "birds pipped joyfully," "baleful crow," "breath of desire," "shimmering with dew," "lap of bliss" and "sad demeanor." Such phrases are coupled too often with awkward phrasing and a flat handling of line, as in "We see the stars because they are burning up" and "The more we yearn toward her as she sleeps."

Reading these poems is like listening to the star student in an advanced literature class, the intelligent one who makes one good point and then another good point, and then another, another . . . and as the class begins to nod, the student—just when you think her brilliant monologue is finished—lifts her voice over any attempt to stop her and sails on into another good point, another, another . . . so in love with her own brilliance it seems she'll never wind down.

And so, in this collection, we hear at great length of pines and dreams, as Kinzie reflects in "Lunar Frost," "I question / Everything, break the world down / By questions again / Into incompletion . . . ," hear in "Eld," "That our rewards came in proportion to / The practice crippling us as we broke through // Boring us, too. . . ." When Kinzie has a fine image, as when she shows us a water fountain's "shallow dish / Nubby and flecked with local sand suspended / Like frozen atoms in its vast cement," she can't resist adding "Images of interstellar pools / Suspended in an interstellar thirst." She uses much high diction and then unaccountably gives us the following: "Could I not see / It had no motive for nor part in this / —This shrinking of the old garden, washed in piss. . . ."

One feels, too, that the book's poems are mainly a preparation for its last and title section, poems where the poet goes on and on and on about how awesome it is to have a late child, how wonderful the child is, how much she and her husband love their child, what a huge amount of new realizations this new child brings, until the reader—forgive me—starts edging for the door. Kinzie's subject in this collection, no matter what the nominal inspiration of the verse, is how fascinating her own thought is to herself.

John Ash writes the now-familiar John Ashbery-type poem much as John Ashbery writes it: lots of clever associations, mixtures of references to painting and music and history with day-to-day mundanities.[2] The book is sprinkled with a good amount of "O's" and "perhaps's." The sensibility is one part Donald Barthelme, one part Kenneth Koch, toss in a little Geoffrey Hill, and let the rest be Ashbery. It is all extremely clever, the "I" finding its substitute in "you" throughout ("You had crossed the ocean," "you habitually rise early," "You came on the tourist bus and will soon be going"), containing hundreds of observations similar to, "The future is a locked factory gate," "some small clumps of cloud so white they / are

[2] THE BURNT PAGES, by *John Ash*. Random House. $19.00.

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like / roses that have seen ghosts" and "We remain in the shadow of the chestnut"—easy and fun to do once you've seen Dali or dada'd in the streets.

The poems are rife with personification, descriptions, similes growing everywhere, self-pleasings ("I am pleased to discover that there is a town in Turkey called Batman. / Alas, it is surrounded by oil wells and is entirely unpicturesque"), put-downs, grins, alleviated here and there with neat realizations like,

> Often a person is beautiful,
> not because they resemble Hyacinth,
> but because we remember the room or garden
> where we first saw them; we see the light
> that first surrounded them, the leaves
> amid which they laughed—

and how "Smoke" arrived "as a ghost, as many ghosts, / visible in the mouths of tunnels."

For the most part, however, this is self-indulgent surrealistic light verse, too often in the passive voice. The book contains three or four good poems, including "Twentieth Century" ("The cleaning fluid is running out. The century is coming to an end") and "Following a Man," which concludes:

> . . . . I was overcome
> with a sudden feeling of elation at the thought
> that it was within my power to record this incident
> which is unexceptional
> as the budding of pear trees in their season,
> unrepeatable as the first sight of a great city.

Still, most of these are poems written with a tiresomely regular accentual beat, tourist shipboard table poems, charming, witty, erudite chitchat about hither and yon.

Even more self-indulgent is Chase Twichell. Her new book is basically a narcissistic meditative sequence about the self, poems starting with, "Before I knew that I would die," "When I close my eyes," "I had sorrow that misled me," "I'm trying to remember" and "I bit down on the hard / rubber mouthpiece of the snorkel."[3] The poems contain a lot of fish, much praising of the narrator's ability to love and to think about death and to fuck. Typical is: "I had as a child a mind / already rift with sacred greens / I could neither harvest nor ignore" and "sex had become a well / into which I could throw // the

[3] PERDIDO, by *Chase Twichell*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $16.95.

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trash of all my sorrows, / not just that one. // My childhood lay wrecked at the bottom."

In these discursive poems of "I" and "me" and "my," we are told, "I want to love the story of my life, / the stories." She certainly does. She remembers "the ecstasies / of the body, every one. / They are the streetlamps / I follow back into the mystery / that disappeared around me—." There are some good phrases like "Palms in wind make a sound / like knives being sharpened" and

> . . . the peculiar way
> the brain has of sidestepping the actual,
> just as a whole year of love, for example,
> might shrink to a stack of pale-colored,
> just-laundered shirts

but there are too many others like "the loins ask their usual question / concerning loneliness" (picture that: talking loins!). There's one good poem, "Chanel No. 5." The book's closing poem, "The Stolen Emblem," finally transcends as the narrator achieves a universal sense: "I was the living carting the dead around. / I was a treeful of rings." Still, these meditations around the imagined island of Perdido are written in a dull, relentlessly self-centered "plain style" verse of little interest.

I wanted to like Agha Shahid Ali's fourth book of poetry (the book jacket flap tell us he "has been writing poetry exclusively in English since the age of ten"), but this is a slight collection containing some good imagistic poems (the first four in the book and "Medusa," "No" and "Snow on the Desert") and the rest typically made up of the kind of lines and short stanzas of poetry, surrounded by much white space, that makes them seem more profound than they actually are: "And now the road is a river / polished silver by cars," "Mediterranean boy / Icarus of the night," "in New Delhi one night / as Begum Akhtar sang, / the lights went out."[4]

Much of the book has to do with "Evanescence," as the poem—taking off from Emily Dickinson—pretends such a place exists. The poet mourns the sickness of his friend Phil, searches with a nice refrain of "Someone wants me to live," gives us scores of such profound-sounding phrases as: "My house is damp with decades in which / the sun was dark." We feel he is sincere, so very *sincere*, so *extraordinarily sincere*:

> There again is memory
> at my doorstep—

[4] A NOSTALGIST'S MAP OF AMERICA, by *Agha Shahid Ali*. W.W. Norton. $17.95.

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jasmine crushed under
departing feet.

The moon extinguishes
its silver pain

on the window.

Granted, Agha Shahid Ali has an ear for silence and mood, but unfortunately these poems want to impress upon us so much sincere *significance* that we are apt to find them too easy and mannered, the content here not much more than a saturation in controlled sentiment, too often looking like the hundred-thousand-odd other poems which end with little profound gasps or whispers like, "I held myself together / a still breath."

Fleur Adcock is more modest in her attempts than the preceding four poets, perhaps because the British are not burdened by the American poet's so often self-imposed task of producing the big, significant book, and are sustained by a poetry-reading audience that continues to be responsive to the pleasure of traditional verse. *Time Zones* is a delight to read from start to finish, containing the responses of an obviously sensitive, intelligent, concerned, witty poet to both small and significant events at the century's end.[5] Reading Adcock, we remember what it is like to be a "fan" of a particular poet, seeking out that poet's poems from appearance to appearance with confidence we will not be disappointed.

Adcock is particularly adept at linking the domestic to the international, thus reflecting our 1990s global consciousness, as in "Libya":

When the Americans were bombing Libya
(that time when it looked as if this was it at last,
the match in the petrol-tank which will flare sooner or later,
and the whole lot was about to go up)

Gregory turned on the television during dinner
and Elizabeth asked the children to be quiet. . . .

The children hide under the table, except for the fifteen-month-old who chuckles, bangs her spoon, and sings "Three blind mice, three blind mice."

In other poems, the poet mourns her father's death, shows us a totally different sensibility to the death of a toad than did Richard

[5] TIME ZONES, by *Fleur Adcock*. Oxford University Press. $9.95p.

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Wilbur ("it lay lengthwise / flabby-skinned across my palm, / cold and stiff as the Devil's penis"), and love of such as house martins, turnip heads, crane-flies and the sounds made by a wren ("I'll get the tape recorder. / I'll find an old cassette to record over"). She mourns, gently, the greenhouse effect, the last moa. She takes much of her inspiration from what television brings into the household (as do we all), responding to Romania, radioactive levels, pollution. She rhymes, giving us a delicious treatise called "A Hymn to Friendship," from which:

> Families, of course, are traditionally awful:
> embarrassing parents, ghastly brothers, mad aunts
> provide a useful training-ground to prepare us
> for the pseudo-relations we acquire by chance

and the funny "Smokers for Celibacy." The collection concludes with two sequences: one, "Mrs Fraser's Frenzy," about a woman captured and enslaved by cannibals, showing both how they regard her and she regards them—and the very touching "Meeting the Comet," a prime example of stiff upper lip cheerfulness concerning a child born with a deformed hand. Here's section 10 of the 24-section sequence:

> Rise above it! Swallow a chemical:
> chuck down whisky, Valium, speed,
> Mogadon, caffeine; bomb it or drown it.
> But wait! If chemicals did the deed
>
> pandering to their ways compounds
> the offence. Resist: you know they lead
> to trouble. Find another obsession.
> Face a healthier form of need.

Another British poet, Dick Davis, is equally accomplished.[6] He is more abstract, less worldly than Adcock and mainly strives for purity of form and response in his work; he is content—at least so far—with modest, polished verse, quite traditional effects. Although clichés are plentiful, they somehow seem a bit more acceptable than in Kinzie because of how the very tight form accepts them as part of a broad audience appeal technique. Here are the not-uncharacteristic first two stanzas of "Don Giovanni at the Opera":

> God is not here nor there, though there
> Breasts swell to the attack

[6] A KIND OF LOVE: Selected and New Poems, by *Dick Davis*. University of Arkansas Press. $19.95.

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Of Mozart, and her loose dark hair
Spills on her naked back.

God is not here nor there, though there
The new soprano sings
Betrayed Elvira's wild despair,
Plucking his nerves like strings.

There's a plenitude of little nicely-wrought poems, such as "Love in Another Language," "Vague, vagrant lives . . . ," "Living in the World," "Metaphor," "Love," "False Light," "Desire" ("Of the violence of that pain / What poor traces still remain— // This I learnt: the wry technique / Of avoiding what I seek"), poems to which a fitting response might be simply, "How nifty!"

Davis commonly takes modest inspiration from looking at paintings, from lives of great historical figures, from romantic love. In "A Letter to Omar" he makes plain, by his admiration, what he himself wants from a poem: "You left the busy trivia unspoken" and

. . . all set out (I thought so then, I think so now)
In stanzas of such finely-wrought, distinct know-how
They were my touchstone of the art (it is
A taste our pretty *literati* think low-brow).

Such fierce uncertainty and such precision!
That fateful meter mated with a vision
Of such persuasive doubt . . . grandeur was your
Decisive statement of our indecision.

In "The Tribe of Ben": "Not rage or grief but grace, / An undeluded peace / Hear how such passion gives / Perfected verse its voice." There are good, old-fashioned (in all meanings of the word), very British poems, of small observations, graces and despairs, the best to my liking, "Middle East 1950s" and "Ibn Battuta." In the new poems, Davis demonstrates that he is accomplishing his goal, with a string of lovely poems including "Undine," "Wisdom," "Lady with a Theorbo," "Oatran" and such witty four-liners as "Fatherhood":

O my children, whom I love
Whom I snap at and reprove—
Bide your time and we shall see
Love and rage snap back at me.

Linda Pastan's poems are the kind likely to make fans out of her readers. She is a loving, responsive poet, sensitive to a multitude of stimuli, constructing her work mainly in the American free form style of careful phrasing—although she sometimes makes a skillful rhymed

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poem. In this new collection she responds most usually to changes of season, flowers, and the deaths of parents.[7] "On the Marginality of Poets" has lines that show her ways:

> And on the margins of the page
> it is all snow, no footfall yet.
> Here is a perfect white frame
> for anything, a place
> where the sudden afterthought
> is scrawled, or that brief star,
> the asterisk. I want to live
> in the margins:
> those spaces neither here
>
> nor there, like the crack
> between my parents' pushed-together beds . . .

and in "Autobiography in Green":

> Write of the streets
> they say, of the wars
> raging around you.
> And I tell of the gypsy moth
> brooding
> in its gauzy tent,
> of the helpless leaves
> spreading their tethered wings.

Pastan is a poet of a hundred small delights, celebrations, responses, satisfactions, pleasures, descriptions, lickings of sound and images, taste. She listens to a child: ". . . the sound / of the words on her clumsy tongue: / pumpkin, autumn." A clock "no longer / says its beads" but is digital: "Now the only tick left / is the sound of a bullet // moving from chamber / to chamber." Telephone poles are "those cruciform shapes / lining the hills of the country / like stations of the cross." The subjects of her various poems always receive just the appropriate added reflection, as in "The Bookstall" when looking at books "as if they were / freshly baked loaves" she goes on to say, "For life is continuous / as long as they wait / to be read—These inked paths / opening into the future, page / after page, every book / its own receding horizon."

Although many of these poems are autobiographical, they are not narrowly so. Pastan has mastered how to do the autobiographical poem with just the right amount of specific detail to make it convinc-

[7] HEROES IN DISGUISE, by *Linda Pastan*. W.W. Norton. $19.95.

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ing and with just the right empathy and tone to make it possible for us to identify with her. Responding to a cemetery where her relatives lie, for instance, she writes:

I don't feel sad, exactly,
just left out a bit,
as if they kept
from me the kind
of grown-up secret
they used to share
back then, something
I'm not quite ready yet
to learn.

How different this poetry is from British witticisms and stiff upper lips. It is a poetry of acceptance with serious irony, of wonder rather than rattle, a relaxed poetry and phrasing which signifies satisfactions and regrets, not one that clenches the teeth and thrusts the head forward. Always interesting, balanced, seldom profound, this is a poetry we return to more for content than form, a poetry of the whole poem rather than the individual line.

Like Linda Pastan, Dan Masterson once in a while turns to exact rhyme and meter; he, too, loves the sounds poetry can make.[8] This attention is most evident in the amusing poem "Deep," which begins, "Town kid / sitting / on a / neighbor's / dock / eyeing / a frog / with a / fist-sized rock," and in his *tour-de-force* drumming poem "Kachunck." But more characteristic are Masterson's poems about nature, narrative descriptions of Adirondack wildlife or of tough self-reliant backwoods loners. These scorn city slickers, go for rural roots. They are composed with an abundance of participles and literally surge forward as they are said: poems filled with movement toward the closure, flesh and muscle poems, here and there echoing a bit of Frost but more likely on Masterson's main subject, the wild or raw or rural thing being hunted, such as "White-Tail," in its way an American version of John Clare's "The Badger."

Masterson forges a kinship with Nature, pays homage to the "Redtail," "Purple Finch," "Varying Hare," "Beaver" and "Mink." He has a fine catching of how we imagine things we want to do, could do, but do not do (in this case, painstakingly and lovingly repairing a mountain cabin), finds the right words for the loon's cry ("the split-level / scream of the mad old lady"), never plays down or sentimentalizes the violence of Nature. When he turns to people, he goes for

[8] WORLD WITHOUT END, by *Dan Masterson*. University of Arkansas Press. $19.95.

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the vernacular tone ("that's kind of private like"). In "Now and Again," we see a method at work:

> He sits on the wooden bench nailed fast
> to the cabin wall and writes it all down,
> as he always does, meticulously, devoted
> to detail . . .

Constantly throughout *World Without End* we get lots of specific and welcome *information* (all too rare in contemporary poetry) along with the story-telling. The assumed stance or tone of disgust and scorn leveled against human violations of nature is balanced by a tough, flexing of the muscles series of portraits. The Masterson hero in this book is always alone, struggles alone, dies alone with acceptance and little self-pity. And yet he is observed, often humorously or mockingly, in a conscious attempt to avoid sentimentality. At the end of the story of a man who died in an icehouse we hear:

> The floor's all wet with splinters,
> but he had boots. You could see them
> when they carried him out. Dead as a doornail
> was the way one yardman put it. Hard as a rock
> was another. But colder than a mackerel
> seemed best, considering.

It is a poetry probably too macho, instructive more than reflective, but immensely readable, enjoyable, and in such poems as "Winter Sleep" or "Rudy" it achieves real pathos.

Adrienne Rich's ambitious new book is flat out magnificent, its long title sequence an equal companion to Whitman's "Song of Myself."[9] I would never have dreamed such an absorption of Whitman's style could have been made and even if made, I would not have expected it to be so deeply moving, so individualized, that its style acts more as a fulfillment, a complement we didn't know we had missed, than a reflection or imitation. In the thirteen-part title sequence, Rich takes us, as did Whitman, confidently through our world, blending thoughts, observations, vignettes, despairs and identifications with the men and women of the troubled planet, our troubled times. Here are "prematures slipping from unsafe wombs," "the young who are counted out," the countless lonely, "cities where in a mere fifty years language has rotted to jargon," "Waste. Waste," "the rural working poor," and

[9] AN ATLAS OF THE DIFFICULT WORLD, by *Adrienne Rich*. W.W. Norton. $17.95.

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some busy constructing enclosures, bunkers, to escape the common fate
some trying to revive dead statues to lead us, breathing their breath against marble lips
some who try to teach the moment, some who preach the moment
some who aggrandize, some who diminish themselves in the face of half-grasped events
—power and powerlessness run amuck, a tape reeling backward in jeering, screeching syllables—
some for whom war is new, others for whom it merely continues the old paroxysms of time
some marching for peace who for twenty years did not march for justice . . .

There are touches of "Howl" and Eliot's "The Wasteland" and "Four Quartets" added to the Whitmaneque base; there are mournings of lost promises, especially those of the sixties; there is a love of the land, "old ranches, leaning seaward, lowroofed spreads between rocks / small canyons running through pitched hillsides / liveoaks twisted on steepness." Throughout, Rich drives inland, coming to terms with her own mortality, identifies, meditates on history, evil, Nature, and the poet's task. She has composed a love poem to men and women and to her nation.

The title poem is nearly equaled in quality by the poems in the book's second section, including sensual poems like "That Mouth," the very moving sequence of "Eastern War Time" ("searching armed streets / for the end of degradation"), the "Praise to life" of "Tattered Kaddish," meditations on victims and survivors, and on art, and at last the lovely perfection of "Final Notations." Rich's book is truly a small atlas; but it is also the mature poetry of a writer who knows her own power, who speaks in the passionate, ambitious blending of the personal and the universal forever present in major work. She will be read and studied for centuries to come.

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DEAN FLOWER

Invasions of Privacy

FICTION, ESPECIALLY MODERN FICTION, licenses a certain amount of prurience. It invites us into the mind of a character or a narrator, and lets us indulge ourselves there rather freely. We are pleasantly exempt from the risks of any real intimacy. Readers are *supposed* to be eavesdroppers and spies, of a certain kind at least. Filmgoers have to confront their own voyeurism at some point, morally, but readers of Lambert Strether or Lily Briscoe or Quentin Compson are not likely to have that problem. Just looking, thanks. In the Nausicaa chapter of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom watches Gertie MacDowell on the beach while we hear by means of internal monologue the cliché-ridden contents of her soul come forth. Bloom watches her pruriently, and has an orgasm. We invade Gertie's privacy too, in a different way, remaining at what seems a safe aesthetic distance, since none of it actually happens—except by means of our looking at words printed on paper. We are supposed to be critically detached, having "participated" in the scene, if at all, only imaginatively and figuratively. No real Gertie MacDowell has been seen in actuality, hence no privacy violated. Still, I think Joyce may be offering a subtle lesson here about the potential for readerly prurience, a lesson usually ignored. Readers like to award him high marks for the relentless intimacy of his narrative, without asking what that intimacy might be for.

Obviously there's an undercurrent of something unsavory, something collusive, in the way modern fiction makes a commodity of what's usually kept private. So many novels cater so lavishly to our desire for intimate access to another. Really, of course, it's only the illusion of such access. But no matter: it creates a dangerous kind of appetite. Those fat books on the best-seller lists pander to it shamelessly. So does Norman Mailer's latest, fattest novel, purportedly an exposé of Eros and Faust at work in the CIA. Anything for the illusion of privacy and intimacy laid bare. There are a good many better novels around. Not that they eschew intimacy or censor the reader's investigative curiosity: plot, suspense, narrative drive would be lost without that. But these books are better partly because they make us conscious of our power to invade privacy, conscious of the very prurience and voyeurism latent in fiction itself.

Consider the way Ursula Le Guin for example broaches the problem in her latest book, a sequence of stories centered in a small

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town on the Oregon coast.[1] In "Sleepwalkers" she portrays the character of Ava, a motel chambermaid, from five different subjective points of view. Most of her observers know nothing about Ava. The only one who sees her past her ordinariness and "niceness" is an older woman—Mrs. McAn—who is curious to understand why Ava walks "like a woman on a high wire. One foot directly in front of the other, and never any sudden movements." Mrs. McAn's curiosity represents ours, a desire for empathy masking a more primitive desire to probe the interior truth, to *know*. But even when we find out that Ava was driven to kill her husband and now seeks guiltily to hide that justified act, Le Guin reminds us that this too is only a version of Ava's story—a product of the older woman's educated liberal white feminist point of view. The whole story emphasizes the often careless and indifferent power of others in fixing one's identity. Even those who presume to know Ava's "truth," like Mrs. McAn and the reader, participate in the process.

The best stories in *Searoad* concern people like Ava and Mrs. McAn, the more isolated and marginal figures of the town, people who are just passing through, or managing a failing business, or hiding from something in the past, holing up emotionally. Most of them are in a sense looking for a good novel to read. The woman who runs the motel in "The Ship Ahoy" likes to keep one unit free so she can doze and daydream there occasionally. She is startled to hear through her thin wall the anguished sobbing of one of her guests—a young man in the throes of suicidal despair. Shocked, she runs outside, unaware that the sobbing expresses her own repressed anguish. Nothing more is explained; Le Guin resists any further invasion of privacy. "True Love" makes a similar point. It's the wry account of a librarian who knows her books better than anything else, but tries out a summer romance with the new bookseller in town anyway. Her disappointment in him is balanced by a sudden burst of love for the Other Woman in the case—the happiness of having shared something with an otherwise unreachable person.

Le Guin is a scrupulous writer, with a fine sense of the dignity and vulnerability of people—frequently but not exclusively women—whose privacy may all too easily be invaded and abused. Her effort to shape the sequence of stories into something more, a "chronicle" of this coastal village à la Dunnet Landing or Winesburg Ohio, doesn't quite come off. There are some maps of the place, a wispy-poetical prologue about feminine waves and clouds, and a longish three-generations-of-women narrative, "Hernes," at the end. Trouble is, Le Guin doesn't seem to know the Herne family intimately, the way she knows her marginal or itinerant people. So the three generations of Herne women tend to sound alike, to blur into one another, to get lost

[1] SEAROAD: Chronicles of Klatsand, by *Ursula K. Le Guin*. HarperCollins. $20.00.

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in a welter of information instead of dramatized acts. Still, *Searoad* contains a sequence of ten richly interrelated stories, conceived entirely without benefit of science fiction, and the result is impressive if not up to Sarah Orne Jewett's level.

Ron Hansen's new novel, by contrast, flirts with prurience every step of the way.[2] It focuses on the beautiful seventeen-year-old Mariette, who has just entered a convent in upstate New York in 1906. Her purity and intensity of faith have an instant erotic effect on the sisters. But the narrative camera has already hovered sensuously in her boudoir at home, while she divests herself of worldly clothing, and it will do so again just as sensuously when she disrobes for a physical, and again when she dons each rough item of convent dress. So too will be recorded Mariette's every shiver and flush, abrasion and wounding, bleeding, seizure, and ecstasy. Hansen works by epiphanic flashes, finely chiseled sentences, moments of lush vignette followed by austere fragments and shards of narrative. Bursts of conversation followed by hours of silence. If he insists that we invade Mariette's privacy, we invade everyone else's as well, at least briefly—prioress, laundress, librarian, milkmaid, extern, gardener. There are more than thirty such characters. The effect is a little uncanny, couched in the present tense as it is. We seem to inhabit this convent of 1906 *now*. It's a remarkable *tour de force*; Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is all thumbs by comparison.

It emerges that there are two narratives. First, a present tense story of Mariette's entry into religious life, climaxing in a series of miraculous ecstasies and crucifixions. But interspersed with it is a second narrative, looking backward and investigating these suspect "miracles." Although this recollective story is glimpsed only intermittently, it dramatizes Hansen's larger purpose: to test the relation of fiction and history. He makes the former so palpably, powerfully believable and the latter so familiar and sterile in its skepticism. Was Mariette's ecstasy indeed a divine mystery to be celebrated gratefully, or was it a shameful deceit and embarrassment, an episode of manipulation or insanity to be covered up? Improbably enough, Hansen's fiction makes you want to believe in the ecstasy—no mean achievement. But you have to wonder whether his success does not depend too much—as Ingmar Bergman's does in *Cries and Whispers*—on an obsession with the suffering female body. Mightn't we do without the suggestion that Mariette's odious father abused her sexually? Must she be attacked in the night by her convent sisters, stripped and "harried by hands"? Must she pose naked before a mirror, twice, to "esteem" her perfect breasts? If so, perhaps the *tour de force* gets its *force* from prurience after all.

Pete Dexter's force is all male, according to the dust jacket photo on

[2] MARIETTE IN ECSTASY, by *Ron Hansen*. HarperCollins. $20.00.

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his new novel.[3] The brawny-armed author in T-shirt straddles a chair, staring at us glumly, with three punching bags hanging nearby. The invitation is to a bruising. But like Hemingway, his obvious mentor, Dexter likes to punish his heroes smoothly, systematically, with maximum purity of line—and maximum violence. In one fascinating stretch of the novel Peter (the author's younger self, no doubt) goes to the gym day after day to endure a mauling from a skilled fighter who hates him. Dexter spares us no detail of bleeding, battering, maiming, and breaking. In another fascinating stretch Peter goes drinking and gambling with a sleaze named Jimmy Measles (one of Dexter's best, thoroughly repugnant, characters) so that Peter's cousin Michael can sleep with Jimmy's wife. Why Peter chooses these punishments—and prolongs them—the novel seeks not to explain. There's visceral intimacy aplenty, but almost none emotionally. About himself Peter is, in more senses than one, dumb.

Dexter was a tough-guy reporter in Philadelphia, and obviously knows a good deal about its crooked unions, mobster violence, ruling families, and political payoffs. He can put you instantly in the place with the right lingo. But his story is queerly vague about what any of these union organizers and bosses actually do, apart from their steady diet of murder and betrayal. Dexter's Philadelphia is not real like George V. Higgins' Boston or Saul Bellow's Chicago. It serves mainly as a backdrop for testing the male ego: son against father, cousin against cousin, male against female. The misogyny of this novel is particularly virulent, with graphic accounts of fellatio, rear-entry sex, degradation, women used quickly and ignored—or beaten. Not that Dexter's blood brothers could be, realistically, anything but sado-masochistic and latently homosexual. But Dexter seems not to have recognized these tendencies in his own figures. If anything he covertly celebrates them by offering up graphic sexual details for our prurient delectation. In the same spirit he prolongs a scene of killing a racehorse. Gritty realism? Call it rather the pornography of violence. Revealingly enough, the novel has only one funny moment, when a woman annoyed at Peter's male imperviousness yanks a pair of panties over his head. Naturally he doesn't get the message.

Robert Pirsig finds women almost as problematic as Dexter does, but he's wonderfully open about it, and that makes all the difference. His second novel, the long awaited follow-up to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), is another original mix of quasi-philosophical rumination and traditional narrative.[4] "Phaedrus" is again our narrator, this time aboard a sailboat going from the Great Lakes through the Erie Canal to the Mohawk, the Hudson, New York and points south. The journey is to be a solo philosophical one, to re-think the great issue of Quality in Modern Life and to finish the

[3] BROTHERLY LOVE, by *Pete Dexter*. Random House. $22.00.
[4] LILA: An Inquiry into Morals, by *Robert Pirsig*. Bantam. $22.50.

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endlessly sprawling book he's been writing about it. But he picks up Lila, a feral, hard-used woman of ambiguous emotions and needs. She swerves his focus. He wants to know who she really is. Does she have Quality? Is there a place for her in his ideal system, or on his real boat? If not, then isn't something wrong with one or both of them? It's quite a promising *donné*, a little like Crusoe finding Friday's footprint. Alas, Pirsig carries it out very unevenly.

His strength in 1974 was in the careful, physical immediacy of his meditations. You felt the moral issues at work when he talked about meeting the mind that made the machine as you worked on it, and grew to know it. You could savor his empirical way of knowing, his love of intelligent design, the justice of each moral inference so lucidly derived. By contrast the father-son motorcycle narrative wasn't very original or convincing. In *Lila* it's the other way around: the narrative has wonderful solidity, but Phaedrus keeps interrupting it with tedious and overblown lectures. At times the situation verges on Shavian comedy, with the practical Lila puncturing Phaedrus' verbal balloons. More often, however, Lila is too frightened and insecure to do that. And Phaedrus is too preoccupied mentally to notice her. There's a tormentingly long passage of this sort, cutting back and forth between Lila lost in the streets of New York after her purse has been stolen and she can't remember where the sailboat is docked, and Phaedrus safely ensconced in an expensive hotel room, totally absorbed in his role as author-lecturer, telling us about the wisdom of American Indians (and everything else). It's not at all clear whether Pirsig intended to prolong this contrast so ironically. Evidently, like many a lecturer, he just lost track of the time. To his great credit, however, Pirsig makes Lila a dignified, complex, convincingly troubled individual. For all his abstract talk, Phaedrus can still be impressive in his capacity to analyze everything originally and honestly—a Pirsig trademark—and that now includes women.

It is of course politically correct these days to assume that women will write better about themselves than men. But having waded through Marge Piercy's uninspired *He, She, It* and Leslie Marmon Silko's overwritten *Almanac of the Dead*, I can't recommend the politically correct. Try instead Shelby Hearon's latest novel, her twelfth, a good example of how interestingly a woman can portray herself.[5] Cheerful and sharp-tongued, it's the first-person account of a wife who at thirty-nine decides to end her marriage. Not so easy to do when you're married to a sobersides Presbyterian minister in Waco, Texas. But Cile is no Updikean procrastinator. She's been having a bold affair with Drew, an old high school pal of hers, and she wants her freedom despite the church, despite the difficulty of her two teenagers, despite Waco. Hearon's plot is a bit frantic and

[5] HUG DANCING, by *Shelby Hearon*. Alfred A. Knopf. $20.00.

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crowded, but that reflects something of Cile's susceptibility to the push and pull of everyone around her. Then too, there's a comic animism in Cile's world: street names, juke box tunes, multiple choice questions, T-shirt slogans, malapropisms, violent weather, lurid ties, flameburgers—everything takes on a quirky life of its own. She is exceptionally good at conveying the ungainly charm of well-adjusted American teenagers—their quick sarcasm, bursts of energy and idealism, childish wails, casual vulgarity, and moments of miraculous decorum. Underneath all the determined breeziness of Cile's narrative voice, you sense darker things—her tendency to panic as well as a shrewd selfishness. But she disallows any more invasion of privacy than that.

If Hearon's comic style reminds you of Ellen Gilchrist and Anne Tyler, Joseph Epstein's makes you think of Bernard Malamud.[6] Comedy and sadness are nearly inseparable in Epstein's stories. The protagonist is almost always Jewish, usually male, and he's drawn into an intimacy with, or bedeviled by, an alter ego—someone who uses and insults him, someone he might have been. There's the fabulously inept Ira Pinsker who embarrasses and, in a novel, ridicules the narrator, his only friend ("No Pulitzer for Pinsker"). There's the suicidal Louis Schlifkin who cadges a loan and won't repay it, criticizing the narrator's successful business, refusing all help—a Jewish Bartleby ("Schlifkin on My Books"). There's the amoral student who flatters and betrays his teacher ("Marshall Wexler's Brilliant Career") and the celebrated novelist whom the narrator knows as a misanthropic bastard ("Another Rare Visit with Noah Danzig").

But there are other, less Malamudian, counterparts as well: homely little Paula Melnick who has a lifelong admiration for a mobster and his exotic family; businessman Sheldon Kaplan who wants to marry a divorced Frenchwoman because he's so taken with her eight-year-old son; and the Polish aristocrat Peter Kinski, a bachelor professor who finds himself in love with an ordinary Jewish woman, mother of two. Epstein is better when he's not trying to be funny. He should avoid flippant titles like "Kaplan's Big Deal" and "Low Anxiety." What's convincing and moving in his stories grows out of his intimate knowledge of Chicago's North Side over the last forty years. He knows exactly where these people live, how they sound, what ambitions they have for their children, and how they furnish their rumpus rooms. Epstein's most moving story, "The Goldin Boys," is about the fall from grace of twin brothers who seem blessed with spectacular athletic talent, good looks and charm, exceptional brains, and family money. It's told from the point of view of an envious high school friend, who doesn't really know why both boys failed so miserably in

[6] THE GOLDIN BOYS, by *Joseph Epstein*. W. W. Norton. $19.95.

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life. But Epstein can make the bare recital of such family stories speak volumes. That's impressive in a first book of fiction from a writer so settled, after eight books of essays, in another genre.

Short stories—especially Epstein's kind—are less likely than novels to raise questions about prurient spying. They're too short. Elizabeth Graver's stories, however, take more invasive risks.[7] Most of them hold us within a single consciousness—an old woman dying in a hospital, a teenager upset by his mother's sexuality, a small boy whose father dies. Graver's deliberate principle seems to be, select a point of view different from your own. Impel the reader to imagine being a young woman who is crippled and forced to take a menial job in a zoo ("Around the World"). Or imagine being a thirteen-year-old boy trying to get to sleep in the same tent with an attractive woman, his cousin, who is absorbed in her own problems ("Yellow Tent"). The good thing about Graver's work is not so much that she fully answers her own challenges (although she does, consistently) but rather that she is able to convey an understanding so gentle and full. At the end of "The Experimental Forest," for example, she has her unhappy fourteen-year-old, whose sexual advances have just been (nicely) rejected, follow the woodsman around at a safe distance and remove all the research labels he's just carefully painted on each tree. But we understand what she wanted, and it wasn't sex: "I wanted to tell him that all I needed was a little something, a tiny bit of change to poke a pinhole through my summer so that I could see through it—a small hole so that some air could reach through the heat and clear things out." Graver's stories are full of such eloquent moments as this, and it's only her first book.

Julian Barnes's latest novel addresses the problem of intimacy head on and wittily.[8] He is probably the most brilliant inventor of fictional experiments currently writing novels in English, and *Talking It Over* is far and away the best book I have chosen to review. The story is told from three points of view (mainly), and it's about a domestic triangle: Stuart is a dullish young banker, Gillian is the somewhat withdrawn and very attractive woman whom Stuart marries, and Oliver is the neurotic sham-sophisticate friend who falls in love with Gillian. But they tell their stories in a series of *spoken*—rather than internal—monologues, as if to an invisible interviewer. They give verbal performances, then, meant for public consumption and so of course laden with rationalization, self-justification, and half-truth. Barnes's neat epigraph is a Russian saying: "He lies like an eyewitness." Eventually it dawns on you that the person each character comes to confide in so privately is, simply, you.

Other characters address the reader too, occasionally, like Gillian's mother, Madame Wyatt, and a sweet old landlady who thinks Oliver

[7] HAVE YOU SEEN ME?, by *Elizabeth Graver*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $17.95.
[8] TALKING IT OVER, by *Julian Barnes*. Alfred A. Knopf. $21.00.

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"has the AIDS." Then there's an unknown woman who forces her way into the text and is peeved at us:

> What did you say? You want my credentials. YOU want MY credentials? Look, if anyone's got to provide documentation it should be you. What have *you* done to qualify for *my* opinions? What's your authority, incidentally? . . . Look, as far as I'm concerned it's a cream bun to a twopenny fuck whether or not you believe me. I'm giving you an opinion, not an autobiography . . .

Have you ever had your authority as a reader challenged so boldly as that? Come to think of it, what do readers *ever* do to earn their rights to voyeurism and eavesdropping? The above speaker turns out to be Val, an old flame whose lowdown opinions about everybody threaten to ruin *their* authority. So Stuart and Oliver simply gag her to regain control of the book.

As usual with Barnes, what begins as a clever entertainment grows progressively deeper and better. The characters evolve in complexity and pathos. Oliver who tried always to be the dazzling *blagueur* and wit falls into a painfully real love. The staid Stuart is fairly crazed with grief and split by contradictions—he learns a sardonic wit (of all things). Gillian emerges from her customary watchful reticence and, in a sublime imaginative act at the end, resolves the impasse created by the two men. The suspense is perfect. No formula will enable you to guess who wins whom or how it will happen. Few novels seem as authentic and lifelike as this one. My quick summaries fail, of course, to convey the fluidity and idiosyncrasy of Barnes's speakers. You must listen to them yourself: let them invade your privacy.

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MARK JARMAN

The Life of Meaning

IRVING SINGER'S NEW BOOK[1] is aimed not only at "reflective human beings," as he calls them, who may encounter doubts and confusions about the meaning of life, but at "favored human beings" who are prone to a sense of meaninglessness "more so than those who must struggle for mere survival." Presumably only such people will wish to buy and read a book that makes it clear within the first few pages that it is not a self-help guide and will not be offering plans for permanent happiness or increased self-regard or even the bottom line on life's meaning. What it does offer in prose that should appeal to the intelligent general reader is a lucid argument that considers how the meanings of life and death are created, the difference between a meaningful and a significant life, and what is required to love life.

Singer, the author of *The Nature of Love*, a three-volume study of how love has been defined from ancient times to the present, calls this short book a "philosophical exploration" and an "intellectual odyssey." It is based on a series of public lectures on medicine and the humanities given at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institute. In style and approach, it resembles another group of important lectures given early in this century by William James that make up his seminal book, *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. Many of Singer's own ways of thinking coincide with James's. In fact, he aligns himself with a tradition of naturalistic philosophers that along with James includes Hobbes, Hume, J. S. Mill, Comte, Dewey, and Santayana, all of whom, according to Singer, believed that "value originates in vital demands." Singer's own argument is that we create meaning in our lives as part of a natural process and not in response to any prior meaning which may be given or ordained by a supernatural authority. Throughout the book he refutes the arguments of Idealism, much as William James refuted what he called "Rationalism." But whereas James was willing to entertain a pragmatic view of religion, Singer scrupulously avoids any acknowledgment of religious authenticity, aside from a brief nod to pantheism.

Curiously, for all his careful secular thinking, Singer begins his book by using the illustration of Tolstoy who, despite great fame and worldly success, suffered a crisis in mid-life and turned eventually to

[1] MEANING IN LIFE: The Creation of Value, by *Irving Singer*. The Free Press. $19.95.

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the Russian Orthodox faith of the serfs and peasants and beyond that to his own brand of Christian mysticism which gained adherents throughout the world and influenced, Singer points out, such figures as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Tolstoy recognized that life could be dealt with in four ways: through ignorance of its meaninglessness, through epicurean indulgence, through suicide, which he regarded as courageous, and through weakness, which in following his Christian faith he apparently accepted. Though he offers Tolstoy as the example of one who in the midst of apparent meaningfulness suffered what Singer calls "ontological anxiety," Singer admits that Tolstoy's solution is not acceptable to him. Singer believes there is another way, but first he claims it is necessary to acknowledge that life is very likely "a tragedy . . . we perform before an empty house." I think what he offers might be called a new version of stoicism, with a contemporary admixture of humane feeling and without any delusions concerning divine will.

Singer's next examples and objects of contention are modern philosophers who have extended the attempt of Western religion to define the meaning of life, even while refuting religious assumptions. He takes on Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and after them, existentialists or, as he calls them, absurdists, like Sartre and Camus. From the great German philosophers, he takes the sense that we are alone yet united by some vital desire. He discounts Hegel's idealism, Schopenhauer's gloomy will, and finds in Nietzsche's *amor fati* or love of destiny an idea close to his own. He is particularly hard on Sartre and Camus, suggesting that their approach to meaning is very close to that of Western religion, because like the religious, absurdists actually believe that meaning is unitary and findable. Singer bases much of his argument on what he calls "the natural," a concept that a linguistic philosopher like Derrida would dismiss. Still, Singer claims that life is not absurd because, he writes, "What is meaningful to a human being originates in the vital necessities of the human condition and that results from nature as it exists in us."

To accept his argument, we must accept his premise that there is not only something called human nature, but that nature itself is a kind of continuum in which humanity has a special place, designated by the intellect. Like James, Singer is fond of analogies between the behavior of dogs and people. To a puppy's trial and error attempts to reach a bowl of food, he parallels the human appetite for meaning that derives from a desire to reach goals or ideals—goals and ideals that are not ordained divinely but that humans set for themselves. His strongest argument for this premise is in his understanding of the meaning of death.

Singer describes death as "the great destroyer of meaning." To help make his point, he quotes Santayana's view of life's purpose from his essay, "A Long Way Round to Nirvana": "The point is to have expressed and discharged all that was latent within us." This is the

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point of life which death erases. Again Singer takes special issue with Sartre and his view that life is cultural but death somehow is natural and to die is to reenter nature. Singer's argument is that "the cultural derives from the natural" and we fear death because life *is* good, "at least, for one who enjoys his existence." Freud's "death drive" also comes in for criticism. Singer admits that as we age, if we do so normally, our ability to accept death grows, but he believes this may be an evolutionary necessity and not an inherent desire for oblivion. To accept death as a drive or instinct may, he says, "actually mask a subtle form of inauthenticity." His own conclusion is that our instinct is to live and out of that instinct comes a love of life and fear of death. He does a good job of demolishing the logical argument that if death is nothingness, then there is nothing to fear. I think of Philip Larkin's lines from "Aubade" about "specious stuff that says *No rational being / Can fear a thing it will not feel*, not seeing / That this is what we fear." Singer introduces his idea that love is a bestowal of value and that "in loving someone, an individual encases the beloved in values that may live on after the lovers die." Considering whom he addresses in this book, this idea makes sense, though it is limited to certain lucky people. His most forceful argument is that "there is no meaning of death apart from its meaning in life."

Singer is most interesting when he struggles to understand Heidegger's famous statement that "Nothingness nothings." For although this gnomic utterance is very close to Singer's own take on death—that it is the great destroyer of meaning—logically he cannot understand how non-existence can act in any way. But Heidegger's statement is an example of the relationship between reality and language. In that way, in the way in which language makes reality, Heidegger has created a piece of reality. Thankfully Singer does not buy that sort of thinking, and his refusal to buy that sort of thinking has allowed him to write this book, which he points out deals with issues philosophy has had very little interest in for one hundred years. He does admit that Heidegger's question, "Why, in the universe as a whole, is there something rather than nothing?" is the most important issue we could possibly consider.

Singer does not really consider it, however. Instead, he considers what can be accomplished in practical terms within our limited sphere. He quotes Wittgenstein's "astonishment that anything exists" and argues that art, for example, derives from human wonder at existence. But Singer's aim is to achieve a personal understanding of how meaning is created. Obviously he agrees with James that well-intentioned action gives meaning to life, but he is loath to engage in melioristic calls to act. He examines what a meaningful life can be and concludes that the definition must be pluralistic. A life collecting bottle caps, he suggests, can be as meaningful as the life of a saint. Though he refuses the idealism that would see an ultimate reality of forms, still he believes we cannot live without ideals. "Idealization," he

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stresses, is "a jet that propels us" and life "has meaning for creatures that engage in the active preservation of their mode of existence." He builds his formulation of the meaningful life on the foundation of our natural being as animals and embodiments of nature or biology.

> A meaningful life results from . . . purposeful efforts to satisfy ideals leading to gratifications that matter not only in themselves but also in their ability to awaken new desires and new pursuits.

Just as no prior essence can define humanity, he claims, "no single pattern . . . is best for all human beings." Clearly, "meaning" as Singer intends it is different from what we might expect and he anticipates our question. There are two modes of meaning, as he sees it, and they are a person's satisfaction of his or her own needs and desires and a person's identification with other animate beings. The latter gives rise to *significance*.

A meaningful life, the life of that bottle cap collector perhaps, may not be a significant one. In his discussion of meaning and significance, Singer reaches back to Mill's idea of the greatest happiness for the greatest number and states that "a particular life can have significance only insofar as it augments the meaning and happiness of life as a whole." As he zeroes in on this idea he may make his general, reflective, and favored reader uncomfortable, for to lead a significant life requires that, as he quotes Schopenhauer, "we identify with, and act to benefit, every other manifestation of life." What militates against this? Human nature itself, which Singer says is characterized by "restlessness . . . propensity to become sated with current pleasures while always hungering for greener pastures, and . . . inability to perservere for very long in any effort." What is also interesting is that, true to his own roots not only in Western thought but in Western religion, Singer does urge action, as William James did for his listeners, rather than retreat. Yet he offers neither happiness nor serenity, for he warns that a life of meaning and significance may not be a happy or contented one.

Singer takes a final swipe at the absurdists by concentrating on the killer's statement at the end of Camus's *The Stranger*: "Nothing matters." He dismisses this cynical version of Heidegger's apothegm by arguing that, first, however trivial, our own interests do matter to us, and second, if nothing matters, then "it doesn't matter that nothing matters and we need not allow this unimportant fact to affect us." He associates the thinking of the absurdists with the defeatism he believes is inherent in idealism. Since meaning is ultimately unobtainable, such thinking goes, then "nothing matters." For Singer, mattering is something we decide for ourselves. How we extend our sense of mattering depends on an awareness both of ourselves and of others. "To act as if nothing matters," he declares, "is to thwart the innate program of life itself."

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Nature effectively buttresses his argument. Only once or twice in the book does Singer lapse from his clear and efficient prose into jargon. In being aware of the life of others, he offers that each thing has "an ontological biogrammar." This biogrammar gives it its "ontological indefeasibility." Perhaps he could have said simply that all living things have certain inalienable rights.

Reverence for life is the theme that builds throughout the book and it is Singer's conclusion, stated as an ideal: "love of the love in everything." Still, he makes some important conditions. Appeals like Joseph Campbell's to the "rapture of being alive" are not enough to help human beings cope. Our problem is that we experience the passage of time in our lives as a flux that rarely if ever allows us to hold a moment still to savor it. Furthermore, not all of life is necessarily worth living, if, for example, terminal illness makes it unbearable. "Life is worth living," he writes, "when its good elements outweigh the bad" and "no life carries with it a prior assurance of its own permanent worth." He asserts that if we are to achieve a significant life, we must accept that each living thing loves its life and that each has an inherent self-love. But what endowed life with this self-love? Singer insists that it is nature and that nature is circumscribed by its own being. Human beings themselves are severely limited in their ability to love or even revere all life besides their own. Singer offers a compromise that implicitly acknowledges human limitation while suggesting there *is* a prior essence that endows life with meaning.

> If we cannot love all living things as the specific reality that each of them is, we can nevertheless treat them as possible *candidates* for love.

He even goes so far as to imply that one may very well live a selfish but happy existence, but the point is to live a significant life, one that is creative, that augments the life of others, and even adds "greater meaning to the cosmos." He ends by stating ambiguously that "perhaps the meaning of life is the life of meaning." One meaning we might infer from this is that life has more meaning the more it includes meaningful and significant lives. Another is that as long as the question continues to be addressed, it will always have a life and the life of the question will presumably provide meaning to life.

Meaning in Life is a sensible book, in the American tradition of pragmatism, and explains a workable philosophy. Its cash value, as William James would say, is based on the here and now, the world at hand, and our own existence as part of nature. It is a book for alert individuals lucky enough to live within networks of loved ones, friends, and family, who have the capacity to act creatively, bestowing value on their fellow creatures through significant acts of love.

Towards the end of the book, Singer corrects Christ's great

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commandment that we love our neighbors as ourselves. He argues that we must love the difference in our neighbor, not his or her similarity. But he also pokes passing fun at Margaret Fuller, the nineteenth-century mystic who claimed to love the entire universe. He knows that is humanly impossible. It may be humanly possible only to love a few other people besides ourselves, while regarding the rest as "candidates for love." Yet if human desires are natural, as Singer so often insists they are, then the human desire for universal love cannot be denied, though a human being is arguably incapable of it. Who then loves the universe? And within the universe, who elects the loveless and the unloved, all those anonymous candidates for love without anyone to bestow value upon them? Singer declines even to propose such questions. And perhaps he is right. They are after all questions for theologians.

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JAMES FINN COTTER

Raising Cain

I REMEMBER WONDERING IN HIGH SCHOOL: If Cain was Adam's first child, where did the other people come from? Where did he find his wife? Who were these other men warned not to kill him? How could he found cities so soon after Eden? Too clever for my own good at sixteen, I failed to realize that Cain and Abel's story was the tale of our own envy, violence, and survival. Recently, preparing for a library talk on Genesis, I discovered that the Cain-Abel saga so struck the Yahweh author J or the early Biblical redactors that they plucked it from later chronology and placed it first for dramatic effect. The story is at the beginning because our story begins with it.

In his study of the myth, *The Changes of Cain*, Ricardo J. Quinones skips Biblical and Talmudic exegesis to follow Cain and Abel through later centuries, from classical times to the present.[1] What he uncovers sheds light on important shifts of consciousness and behavior in European and American culture. He sees the Cain-Abel theme as the main metaphor for the changes that have marked Western attitudes, especially in the last two centuries, and he argues that our failure to perceive the importance of this myth endangers our self-knowledge for the future.

Quinones presents the theme as both psychological and social. He writes: "The story of Cain-Abel is beset by guilt and moral concern; its arena of debate addresses the rightness of actions and finally the legitimation of the self." And socially: "Cain and Abel are active in a fuller human context both in their own structured binary relationship and in history itself." The myth opens to more complex developments than the myths of Adam, Prometheus, Ulysses, Satan, the Wandering Jew, and others because it turns inward and outward; it contains its own contradictions of life and death, herdsman and farmer, the urban and pastoral, divine favor and rejection. Its ability to change makes the myth a mirror of ourselves, unflattering and strange, as individuals and as masses.

For Quinones, the French Revolution defines a break in Western consciousness. The Enlightenment's ideal of brotherhood mixed with blood in a reenactment of the Cain-Abel conflict. "Be my brother or I will kill you" is how Chamfort rendered the slogan of the Terror,

[1] THE CHANGES OF CAIN: Violence and the Lost Brother in Cain and Abel Literature, by *Ricardo J. Quinones*. Princeton University Press. $29.95.

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fraternité ou la mort. Fratricide motivated by envy sought to bring communion out of discord, unity from division. The act of fratricide springs from the primal offering and foundation sacrifice, not of wheat or animals but of human beings. We kill each other to survive.

Quinones, author of several important contributions to the history of ideas, including *The Renaissance History of Time* and *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development*, as well as *Dante Alighieri* in the Twayne series, reviews responses to the Cain-Abel story among readers like Philo, Augustine, the *Beowulf* poet, Dante, Machiavelli, Byron, Baudelaire, Melville, Conrad, Wells, Hesse, Unamuno, Joyce, Steinbeck, Trocchi, Wouk, and many others. The book offers finely-tuned criticism of comparative literature. Because the focus is so intense on its one theme, the better prepared the reader, the warmer the response, approving or not.

Early interpreters of the Cain-Abel saga developed three views of Cain: citizen-founder of the secular city, monster of depravity, or sacred executioner in a ritual sacrifice of the brother. The last tradition leads to the concept of the double, which Quinones sees as an essential element in the story's own story: "The sacrificed brother has thus greater possibilities for indicating a lost portion of the self, a self that is abandoned, sundered, the twin, the double, the shadowy other, the sacrificed other that must be gone and yet can never be gone." Here Conrad's stories *The Heart of Darkness* and *The Secret Sharer* are seminal texts, offering a modern reading of ancient myths of sacrifice and salvation.

"The Cain-Abel story is potent because it presents the first offering, the first venture out of the self, out of an undifferentiated and unconscious communion, and into an objective world." Quinones thus summarizes his basic argument that the very economy of the original tale opens it to great, universal principles of contention that remain grounded in history. During the medieval period, for example, Christians punished Jews for slaying Christ whose blood, like that of Abel's against Cain, cried out against them. Jew-badges, like the brand that marked Cain, had to be worn from the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 until 1718 when they were banned by Emperor Joseph II of Austria, only to be restored by Hitler in the Third Reich.

In this traditional Christian version of the story, Cain embodies fallen human nature; not only is he unredeemed, he is unredeemable. Not even the child of Adam and Eve, he was bred by Eve and the serpent. Proverbially, Cain is "the first-born of the Devil," the whipping-boy and fall-guy, everybody's scapegoat for the ills of society. He is *homo profanus*, and in the mystery plays a scatological rogue, cursing and cheating God in his offering. Cain has become Caliban and clown, the antithesis of how Augustine in the fifth chapter of book 15 of *The City of God* saw him: the fratricidal founder of the city of man. Cain has even lost the dignity that Dante gives him as the brother-slayer

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who turned the city-states against themselves and bathed them in brothers' blood.

In Lord Byron's *Cain*, which he called "a mystery," the new, regenerate Cain emerges, never to be the same again. For Quinones, only in modern times do the inherent possibilities of the myth appear; in fact, modern times finds its essential theme in Cain reborn. The Abel of the past, a Christ-figure and saintly founder of the city of God, steps into the background. Cain the rebel-outlaw becomes the spokesman of the new age, its values and concerns. He resists the blood-demands of traditional sacrifice and questions the old devotions to a remote God. Byron's Cain stands outside his own family and society, misunderstood and isolated. Lucifer befriends him and becomes his soul mate and double, leading him on a journey into "deep time," a past of chaotic upheavals, disasters, and extinction. Cain accepts his guilt and destiny; he refuses God's forgiveness: "Let me but / Be taught the mystery of my being." Seeking a more humane knowledge of himself and the world, he rebels even against Lucifer and also rejects him.

"In the absence of the father, in the presence of the new ideal of brotherhood that must somehow make an accommodation with change, with violent change based upon the foundation sacrifice, the double for a variety of reasons, emerges as a necessary companion for a regenerate Cain." For Quinones, Byron's addition of the double sets his Cain off from his predecessors. In this parable of modern life, the double arrives out of necessity and yet offers the promise of freedom. Secret knowledge is communicated, mystery and fate stand briefly revealed, and immortality seems almost at one's fingertips. The breach between the rebel and the ordinary world is sudden, abrupt, and permanent. But Byron's hero thirsts for good, and his romantic spirit remains doomed to despair. Like Nietzsche later on, Byron anticipates the nihilism of modernism, yet most modernists ignore him and his poetry.

The original Cain in Genesis 4 claimed that his punishment is more than he can bear. Not so the Byronic hero who bears all that God loads on him. His stoic character is repeated in Henchard, the protagonist of Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and, above all, in Leggatt, Conrad's mysterious seaman in *The Secret Sharer*. While Conrad continues to elevate the person of Cain as he demotes the role of Abel and to develop the sense of a special secret revealed only by contact with a double, he expands the psychic and moral dimensions in the story of regenerate Cain.

The unnamed captain of the ship who hides the stowaway Leggatt tells us that he feels a stranger to his ship and crew and, even more, a stranger to himself. As in the first Cain and Abel encounter, their meeting takes place on a lonely spot, a kind of no-man's-land, far from society. "A mysterious communication" establishes itself between the two as the captain begins to grow in understanding and

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sympathy with the stranger. Leggatt the slayer escapes at the end to prolong his fate as a fugitive from authority while the young captain comes in touch with his secret self at last and for the first time takes full control and saves the ship, experiencing "the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command."

Quinones prepares a convincing case for the centrality of *The Secret Sharer* in the developing Cain-Abel myth. The allusions that Conrad makes to the original story are both explicit and subtle, and he furthers the question of justice by creating in Leggatt a spokesman for a higher moral order beyond the comprehension of ordinary townsmen. As in the case of Oedipus, exile offers a harsher punishment than death.

Quinones goes on to examine John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* as another important contribution to the Cain-Abel theme by showing how the conflict between the brothers Caleb and Aron, as well as their father's preferential treatment, brings the Biblical tale to life in a modern American landscape. Caleb's agricultural success is rejected by his father Adam who favors Aron's educational ideals over Caleb's capitalism. Caleb is a type of the honestly ambitious American, practical, hard-working, and generous. In a materialistic, mechanistic society, is there no hope for Cain? Will his offering be forever rejected? Caleb's divided consciousness as he tries to cope with these dilemmas makes him a suitable modern hero. Quinones observes: "The traditional Cain, the original schismatic, has a divided consciousness. In modernism, this sense of division becomes a positive quality, indicative of superior alertness." Psychologically, regenerate Cain is better prepared to cope with contemporary life than his innocent brother Abel.

Here Quinones makes a valid observation about a great change in American life: "In the larger sense, as the Civil War destroyed the agricultural and Edenic myth of an Adamic innocence, immigration and the emergence of America after World War II helped create the myth of a regenerate Cain." He credits Steinbeck with fashioning his own myth of the transformation from Adam to Cain as central figure and regrets that critics have not given him sufficient credit for his achievements.

Quinones finds brilliance in Jack Schaefer's novel *Shane* with its use of Western violence in the gunfighter who is a marked man and condemned to be a wanderer. He also discusses *The Caine Mutiny* by Herman Wouk as less successful in its exploration of the Cain-Abel theme, claiming that it cops out in its conclusion by siding with authority over the individual's need to rebel.

Wouk's compromise in the courtroom scenes contrasts sharply with Herman Melville's vision of stern justice in *Billy Budd*. Quinones views this tale as central to the theme of envy as a motive in the Cain-Abel myth. Abel plays a larger role in this version of the story, but Cain remains a main actor. Claggart as Cain is envious of the handsome,

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simple, innocent Billy whose virtues, Melville informs us, predate "Cain's city and citified man." Ironically, in *Billy Budd* Abel slays Cain and is not spared but himself executed: "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!" as Captain Vere exclaims. Here no regeneration of spirit or authority occurs. The political system deliberately fails to interpret the inside narrative, symbolic of a continuing problem in our culture today.

In following chapters, Quinones takes a close look at other variations on the Cain-Abel theme of envy, in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, Joe Orton's *Prick Up Your Ears*, and Miguel de Unamuno's *Abel Sanchez*. The final section of the study looks at the Cain of the future through Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, and Alexander Trocchi's *Cain's Book*, and then the theme of twinning or doubling in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Unamuno's *El Otro*, and Michel Tournier's novels, *The Ogre* and *Gemini*.

Quinones observes that literature of the nineteenth century was alert to the future, with a sense that something of extraordinary significance was at hand. Even if that future news promised to be bad, as in *The Time Machine*, still the future existed as an eventful, enormous continuum with the present and the past. After World War II, history became a thing of the past and with it went the future. Only present consciousness exists and it is in shambles. Quinones writes: "If words and thought have little relationship to events, if words, *les mots*, are thought to perpetrate violence against things, *les choses*, then out of this distinctly postmodernist situation a new breed of hyperconscious yet violent monster will be born for which Cain will once again serve as cover." Quinones places his hope in the power of the myth itself to regenerate the human spirit.

Not every detail fits the puzzle Quinones has spread out before us. Sometimes the myth appears like a Procrustean bed for which stories are cut down to size. For example, Billy Budd is actually compared to Adam not to Abel, and the Edenic and father themes more perfectly fit the pattern Melville creates. Quinones also appears to substitute books for life; stories converse with one another, and we are taken behind the scenes to listen in at MLA conferences where these matters of life and death are earnestly discussed and decided. Some marvelous revelation is at hand and here comes the beast, Cain, bearing it. If only the mid-eighteenth century had heeded the warning against violence in Salomon Gessner's *Der Tod Abels*, it would have sent cultural shock waves through Europe. However, it is not too late to listen to Unamuno, Hesse, and Steinbeck. Really?

Quinones writes with true eloquence and conviction, but at times his style causes claustrophobia. He is fond of statements like "individuation must transcend undifferentiation," and repeats variations on this jargon several times in the same paragraph. Nor has he been well served by his copy editor when he writes "far more profounder

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interpretations" (p. 68), "place emphasize on" (p. 134), and "had seeks" (p. 165).

These are trivial pursuits, however, that should not obscure the major quest this study undertakes: to make readers aware of a (or *the*) central theme in literature and how it permeates our culture. Quinones leaves up to his readers to make connections with current plays and films in order to discover for themselves how Cain and Abel still act out their ancient ritual of life and death, violence and self-identity, rebellion and regeneration. One learns a lot from reading Quinones, and not the least is to want to read more of his many sources.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

SUSAN BALÉE,* Ph.D., lives in the Washington, D.C. area and works part time as a Congressional court reporter. . . . This past year DANIEL HOFFMAN was Visiting Professor at King's College London. His most recent book of verse, *Hang-Gliding from Helicon* (Louisiana State University Press), won the Paterson Prize for 1989. . . . KERMIT MOYER is the author of *Tumbling*, a collection of stories published by the University of Illinois Press. He is professor of literature at The American University in Washington, D.C. . . . S. OSO* has a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy and a Master of Divinity in biblical languages. He has held over fifty jobs including commodity broker, sheet metal worker, taxi driver, short order cook, and parking lot attendant, and now supports himself trading stock. "Lessons" is his first published work. . . . MICHAEL VAN WALLEGHEN teaches at the University of Illinois. His most recent book is *Blue Tango* (University of Illinois Press, 1989). . . . JAMES W. TUTTLETON is a Professor of English at New York University. . . . PEYTON HOUSTON's* two most recent publications are *Poems on the Shape of the Morning*, which has just appeared, and *The Changes/Orders/Becomings*, published in 1990. Recently retired, he was a corporate executive. He lives in Connecticut. . . . MARK PERLBERG is completing his third book of poems. He teaches a poetry workshop at the Newberry Library in Chicago.

JEFFREY FRANKLIN* is in the Ph.D. program in literature at the University of Florida. Previously he worked as a national science and technology policy analyst. He lives in Gainesville. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY is a New York writer currently working on a biography of the painter John Sloan. . . . DICK ALLEN, author of four collections of poetry, is co-editing an anthology of Expansive Poetry. He has been reviewing poetry for American periodicals and literary magazines for thirty years. . . . DEAN FLOWER's essay on the best fiction of 1991 will appear in the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook* in August. . . . MARK JARMAN's latest book is *Iris*, a book-length poem published by Story Line Press. His collection of poetry, *The Black Riviera* (Wesleyan University Press), won the 1991 Poets' Prize. He teaches at Vanderbilt University. He is a Guggenheim Fellow for 1991–92. . . . JAMES FINN COTTER, president of the Hopkins International Association, has articles in the current *Hopkins Quarterly* and in several collections published for the Hopkins Centennial.

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TEN WAYS TO KNOW IF YOUR NEIGHBOR IS A SPACE ALIEN:

10. Has trouble with spatial relationships, such as frequently walking into door jambs.

9. Uses overly formal language, such as "May I have the pleasure of accompanying you to your backyard lawn chair?"

8. Uses a paring knife to eat Cheerios and milk.

7. Wears underwear on the outside of jeans.

6. Asks for beer to be served on the rocks.

5. Thinks poetry has mass market appeal.

4. Believes Marxism died when Groucho did.

3. Supports Harold Stassen for President in 1992.

2. Maintains that Madonna's hair is naturally blond.

1. Doesn't subscribe to The Village Voice.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

When the Prince of Wales crosses the Channel for some French entertainment, Muffat serves as his cicerone. Together they visit the Variétés and between acts go backstage where Nana, half-naked, receives them in her dressing-room. Queen Victoria's rakish son, who feels very much at home, converses with perfect aplomb. But exposure to the voluptuous tart unnerves Muffat. "He, who had never seen the Comtesse Muffat put on her garters, was witnessing the intimate details of a woman's toilet, in a chaotic disarray of jars and a cloud of sweet perfume" . . .

—Frederick Brown,
"Zola and the Making of *Nana*," p. 191.

. . . I called again, *Sarah, Sarah*, my insides lurching toward her even though I was afraid to move. I wasn't so much trying to get her attention as simply chanting her name and repeating, *thank God, thank God*, when she evidently finished printing the last letter, because she laid her crayon down—it was the yellow one—and she finally turned toward me. And just as her head lifted, there was another change in the light, as if the wind had blown the branches of a tree outside the kitchen window, and before her eyes could meet mine, I saw that what I was looking at wasn't Sarah at all but a pattern of leaf shadow on the wall behind the table.

—Kermit Moyer, "Chiaroscuro," p. 221.

Irving Howe, in "Black Boys and Native Sons," has even gone so far as to say that "the day [Richard Wright's] *Native Son* appeared, American culture was changed forever." And so, in a sense it was. A new work of great imaginative power rearranged the tradition of American fiction . . . Equally as important, after *Native Son*, white readers no longer found it possible to luxuriate in an illusion of black docility, passivity, and contentment.

—James W. Tuttleton,
"The Problematic Texts of Richard Wright," p. 261.

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